

Michigan housing market off to good start in '96

BY DOUG FUNKE

STAFF WRITER

Last year was a good one for residential builders in southeastern Michigan. This year is shaping up to be even better.

Building permits for houses and condominiums here during the first three months of 1996 increased by 10 percent over the same period last year, a Canton-based tracking service reported.

The actual numbers were 3,888 units compared to 3,340, according to U.S. Housing Markets.

Nationally, permits were up 14 percent.

In terms of volume, it was the second best January-March period for the country as a whole since 1977, U.S. Housing Markets reported.

Just over 234,325 single-family units were permitted during the first quarter this year compared to the record 235,028 in

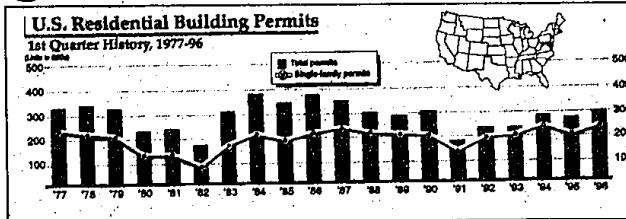
1994. Ten counties including Oakland and Wayne defined southeastern Michigan.

"The job market around here is very strong," said Brian H. Bragg, editor for U.S. Housing Markets.

"The home buying public around here is pretty sensitive to interest rates. When interest rates bottomed out in late February, and started to tick up, they're about a percentage point higher now, that pushed a lot of people off the fence."

"They were scared they would go up again. There was a rush to buy homes," Bragg said.

Every metropolitan area examined in the Midwest showed a jump in units permitted. The increase ranged from 5.6 percent in Chicago (6,110, 5,398) and Milwaukee (791-835) to 65.4 percent in Kansas City (1,748-2,731).



Active builders: The number of single family residential building permits issued during this year's first quarter was on the upswing after a reversal in 1995.

The Northeast, including Pittsburgh, Philadelphia, New York/Long Island, Providence and Boston, was especially hard hit, experiencing an overall 5.4

percent decrease in permit activity.

The West, including Salt Lake City, Phoenix, Orange County, Calif., and San Francisco Bay, did especially well, showing an overall 18.6 percent increase.

in the Northeast and an unusually wet winter in '95 out West, Bragg said.

"Builders aren't bothered so much by cold weather," he said: "When you get muddy ground, you can't get trucks in and out. When you have rain and snow, you can't get framing up. We haven't had a bad building season at all."

Southeastern Michigan was one of the few areas in the country to show an increase in single family permits issued for 1995. Activity here was up 3.4 percent compared to a decline nationally of 6.5 percent.

"I think we're going to have a decent year, probably about the same as last year," Bragg said. "Maybe even a little better, unless something unforeseen happens to interest rates. People keep looking for inflation. So far we don't have any."

Handymen are still a fixture in high-tech world

CHICAGO (AP) — In an increasingly high-tech world, it's comforting to know that handymen can still fix much of it.

In fact, while other professions are downsizing, handwork is a burgeoning trade. In 1994, Americans spent an estimated \$115 billion on home improvements — \$43 billion on maintenance alone, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

Hardware store managers,

contractors and homeowner groups think they know why much of that work is going to handymen: Most people aren't that handy anymore. And college-educated, upper-income wage earners now have more money to spend on a handyman with than they have time to repair household glitches.

The handyman himself isn't what he used to be. In fact, quite often he's a she. Increasing num-

bers are women entering the field through painting and decorating jobs. The job itself is more sophisticated, too. They carry cellular phones and pagers and deal with temperature-regulat-

ing valves and washerless faucets.

Ron Kehr is a college-educated man, who at 40, dumped his high-stress job as a successful music industry executive to take

up the tool belt. He learned to repair leaks, refinish cabinets and retile floors from books and observation.

Remodeling experts warn

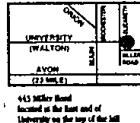
that consumers beware of unqualified workers and scam artists. They advise checking references, refusing to pay money up front and drawing up detailed contracts on the job.

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