

# Smaller houses to suit new kinds of families

By Tim Richard  
staff writer

A new kind of house buyer, with a pent-up demand, will force builders to put up smaller houses, many of them "cluster" developments.

That forecast came from leaders of the Builders Association of Southeastern Michigan (BASM) this week. They cheerfully predicted building twice the number of units as in 1983 (though only half as many as in the peak year of 1978).

"New people demand a different kind of housing," said Paul Robertson Jr. of Robertson Brothers, headquartered in Bloomfield Township. "It's a matter of demographics. We have a new profile couple.

"In 1950 something like 63 percent were the traditional 'Leave It to Beaver' families — father working mother taking care of the kids.

"In 1984 only 16 percent are traditional families. The other 84 percent are different," said Robertson, first vice president of BASM. He finds more working couples and fewer children.

"Buyers don't need the four-bedroom, 2½-bath house with a den."

"The five-bedroom house is almost unmarketable," added Dennis P. Dickstein of Ralph Manoe Associates of Birmingham.

Builders agreed the three-bedroom house will be most in demand and that the two-bedroom unit, once considered unmarketable, will be a safe buy.

A MAJOR complaint of past years — tight building restrictions, particularly in Canton Township — was voiced more softly this year.

BASM President Richard Roeser said the association would "continue to place increased emphasis on working with state and local legislative bodies to modify the various ordinances and statutes . . . which are restrictive and unreasonable and result in adding costs which do not make for better housing — only more expensive housing.

But when asked if they had made any progress in the last year, Robertson reported "a dramatic change" in the attitude of local governments. "Our company is in four different municipalities — Beverly Hills, Birmingham, Bloomfield Hills and Bloomfield Township. They have adopted cluster ordinances which allow higher density.

"There has been an easing of zoning ordinances for single-family detached dwellings on 80-, 90- or 100-foot lots.

"West Bloomfield Township has a cluster ordinance, too. It's coming, and coming pretty rapidly," said Robertson, adding, "I can't speak for Canton Township."

OTHER PREDICTIONS and observations by the BASM's officers:

- Most popular price ranges will be "low" (\$60,000 to \$80,000) and high (\$150,000 and up). Prices have been stable in the last year, although some drywall shortages could result in increases for that material.

- Many of the older, more skilled building tradesmen stayed in the tri-county region through the recession. "We see more persons' and direct responsibility on the part of the worker. The general worker today cares," said Robert R. Jones of Robert R. Jones Associates.

- Hot market spots will be Troy, Novi, Avon Township, Bloomfield Township and Sterling Heights in Oakland County and Livonia in Wayne County.

- Nearly 10,000 building permits will be issued in the metropolitan area, double the nearly 5,000 in 1983 and far more than the bottom 1,742 permits in 1982. But they are "a long way from what is nor-

## Optimistic builders predict 10,000 units in '84

mal production," said Roeser, defining normal as the 20,000 units started during 1978.

- Consumer confidence is high. Many young couples have been doubling up with parents and want their own home. Apartment owners have low vacancy rates, a sign that many who have been renting will want to move to a house. The 40,000 "Homorama" show visitors have been visibly enthusiastic.

- Brick will continue to be costly. Buyers will see blends of masonry, wood and other materials.

- Although no numbers were available, Roeser said a "surprising number of builders survived (the four-year recession) — a lot more than any of us anticipated." Added Irvin Yackness, BASM's general counsel, "Many builders diversified into small offices, commercial buildings, remodeling and rehabilitation."

THE CLOUD hanging over the building industry, Roeser said, is the high interest rates caused by the nearly \$200-billion federal deficit, which soaks up

credit that could otherwise go into housing mortgages.

Roeser predicted unless Congress and the Reagan Administration reduce the deficit, the prime interest rate could soar again to more than 20 percent.

"Unfortunately, during an election year, nobody in political office likes to talk about cutting spending or increasing taxes," Roeser said.

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Master gardener is designed for people with at least a moderate level of horticultural experience. However, no previous formal training is required.

Master gardener candidates are also expected to volunteer at least 30 hours of their time during the upcoming gardening season, staffing plant clinics, answering telephone hotlines or giving gardening talks.

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