

House takes bigger chunk of check

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Although building permits last month dropped to 49 from 61 in May and 73 in April, the housing business in Farmington Hills can be considered to be booming.

AVON TOWNSHIP in northern Oakland County is probably the only other community that is topping Farmington Hills in residential building, Miller said.

"They are a speck ahead of us in residential construction," he added, though still lagging in commercial and industrial building.

The reason for the boom, particularly when interest rates are high, can most likely be found in an improved and considerably more stable economy, Miller said.

"They probably have a little more money," he added, referring to potential home buyers.

A GOOD indication, he said, of a more stable economy is the parallel growth in the number of swimming pools and garages.

A good haul of residential building, can be found in about 20 new and existing subdivisions throughout Farmington Hills although most growing neighborhoods are west of Farmington Road.

THE MOST active areas of building in the Meadow Hills, Meadow Brook Park and Meadow Glen subdivisions near Nine Mile Road and Halsted, said Barbara Aldrich, administrative secretary in the building department.

Section 6, west of Halsted, between 13 and 14 Mile roads, is also one of the

areas experiencing a lot of building, particularly of more expensive homes, she said.

More building, in fact, is occurring with houses costing more than \$125,000. While buyers are paying a high price for size, most houses ranging from 3,500 square feet up to 3,800 and 4,000 square feet, the cost of land figures prominently in the total purchase costs, Miller said.

THE PRICE tag for the usual Farmington Hills subdivision lot of 80 by 150 square feet is an average \$30,000, Miller said.

"Land costs have skyrocketed," he said. "Land costs really dictate the cost of the house you're going to build."

In fact, if one of the houses, for example in the Meadow Hills or Meadow Glen subdivisions, was built just over 8 Mile Road in Livonia, it would sell for about \$10,000 less, Miller said. That's because the house more than likely would be on a smaller lot and would be in Wayne County rather than Oakland County.

And, believe it or not, Miller said, the name of the county, suburb and even subdivision has a lot to do with the price of a house.

FOR EXAMPLE, Aldrich said, the same house in the Meadow Hills, Meadow Brook Park or Meadow Glen subdivisions would cost more than the same house in a subdivision west of Inkster, between Nine and 10 Mile roads. Living in Ramblewood subdivision, west of Farmington Road, as another example, implies status because of the cost of homes in the neighborhood, according

to building officials.

Meanwhile, despite the displeasure of some neighbors, about 10 houses in the \$50,000-\$70,000 range were sold in the Springbrook subdivision, west of Middlebelt, between 10 and 11 Mile roads, Miller said. Financing for the purchase of the homes was obtained through the Michigan State Housing Development Authority.

"THE HOUSING was comparable in size to the others in the subdivision," Miller said.

While the increase in building permits and the ensuing site plan reviews have increased work in the building department, the housing jump is a welcome relief to the slump a couple of years ago.

In the late 1970s, Miller said, the housing business was "rolling along. Then the slump hit."

As it deepened, some builders were left in the cold with 50 building permits outstanding. That meant that 50 basements had to be decked for about two years until the economy improved. Some builders even sold their basements to other builders who still had some cash flow. Other builders went to the bank.

IN THE days before the slump, Aldrich and Miller said, developers would go into a subdivision and build it up in one fell swoop because it was less costly that way — if a developer had the money.

"Then came the downturn (in the housing economy) and the developers got stuck," Miller said. "The developers are really in a squeeze or a bind

depending on the economy."

Even though the housing industry is doing great, Miller said, developers are playing the game very cautiously.

Today, instead of building up a subdivision all at once, the developer builds a small section at a time, sells the houses, and then moves on to another section of the subdivision.

ONCE A developer takes a raw piece of land and constructs the underground utilities and the primary roads, "he gets zapped by the taxes," Miller said. A developer pays less taxes on raw land than on land with utilities even without homes.

Although many builders felt the adoption last fall of a "downsizing ordinance" was only adding insult to injury as the housing industry was pulling itself out of a slump, Aldrich and Miller say the ordinance's requirements have caused few, if any, problems for developers or builders.

"THE BOTTOM line of it was that there was very little problem with downsizing here," Miller said. "The city's minimum zoning requirements exceeded subdivision size requirements in all cases."

Farmington Hills residents demanded the ordinance in reaction to builders constructing smaller and less expensive homes in neighborhoods of larger, more expensive homes in Novi, in particular, Miller said.

"Although the ordinance has brought an additional load of work for the building department, such as double-checking building plans, Aldrich says "we do have it down to a routine."

Nichols defends police department

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lice department make use of the city's central office for activities such as purchasing, personnel, planning and budgeting.

When Mayor Charles Williams asked the auditors if they knew whether the police department worked through the city's purchasing department, they said they didn't know.

"This is exactly what I'm pointing out ladies and gentlemen. They did no research at all," Nichols said, adding the department now does what is being suggested. "I do not see the problem that is pointed out here."

While the auditors continued to maintain they were not saying the department was organized poorly, Nichols continued to admonish them for not fully investigating the situation.

Councilman Joe Alkateeb, who a week before commented he was unhappy with the manner in which the management audit of other departments was done, said he believed all the audit said was to return the police department's structure back to the old way.

"The chief said this report is shallow. I submit the report was very shallow. It was a compilation of a Christmas wish list," Alkateeb said.

WHILE WILLIAMS and Council-

woman Joan Dudley said the audit should not be taken as a personal attack and used only as a guideline of ideas, Nichols made it clear he resented the recommendations made in the audit.

But following Nichols' line of thinking that the auditors had failed to conduct a thorough investigation of the department, Dudley asked the auditors why they didn't "look into the facts."

"I'd like you to respond to the allegation that there was no investigation specific enough for you to make a recommendation," Dudley told the auditors.

Nagengast responded that they attempted to "identify opportunities" rather than "label problems."

"We're not in here to tear apart the

department on a statistical basis . . ."

Nagengast said.

Rather than completing the review of the police department audit, however, councilmembers sank into confusion about the audit's purpose.

"I'm not sure now what a management audit is to be," Soronen said, adding some of the recommendations had previously been tried and failed, yet are a part of the audit.

Alkateeb, on the other hand, said he was looking for some "hard facts" rather than ideas.

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