

# Rapid growth: City hall feels the pinch

By Joanne Maliszewski  
staff writer

Growth. There's no doubt it's happening in Farmington Hills. Some of the signs are obvious — traffic congestion, increased building, denser neighborhoods.

The less obvious signs can be found at city hall.

The six-to-seven days it used to take to obtain engineering site plan approval now takes about four weeks.

The building permit that used to take several days to issue now takes at least a week.

"Builders will come in with 15 permits. That just jams us right up. We try to hand out permits on a first-come, first-serve basis. But the guy who just wants a porch addition — something simple — gets caught up in the process now," City Manager William Costick said.

Days, overtime and the need to hire outside help have all been due to the construction boom that's enveloped Farmington Hills in at least the past two years.

"WE'RE JUST trying to keep up with the flow," Community Development Coordinator Richard Lampi said. "And I don't see signs of it slowing down in the near future."

The tell-tale sign of what's been happening in the city can be found in statistics gathered by both the city and Oakland County Planning Office.

In 1985, Farmington Hills ranked first in Oakland County in the number of building permits issued for residential and office construction, Oakland County Planner Marlin Rubin said.

Last year, Farmington Hills issued 2,423 residential building permits. Even second-ranked Rochester Hills didn't come close with its 1,729 permits issued.

Of the total \$574 million spent in Oakland County residential construction in 1985, \$118 million, or 20 percent of the total, was attributed to activity in Farmington Hills.

Office construction also dominated the Hills in 1985. Again ranked as number one, Farmington Hills issued 36 office building permits. Southfield ranked second with 27.

IN THE first six months of 1986, Farmington Hills has issued 555 residential building permits, 11 office, three commercial (retail) and two industrial, Rubin said.

"As long as interest rates stay down, we will continue to grow," Lampi said. "We just didn't antici-

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— Richard Lampi  
Community development coordinator

pate interest rates dropping as they did. The increase (in construction) has been tremendous."

Farmington Hills Planning Commission agendas with the usual 15-20 items "is an indication to us there is an intent to develop for quite awhile," Lampi said.

With about 75 to 80 percent of the city developed, there's still plenty of open land for this type of growth to continue for a couple of years — if the economy is maintained at its current level, Costick said.

In the long run, the construction boom will increase the city's state equalized value (SEV). In the short run, the city's goal is simply to keep pace with residents' increased demands for services, needed improvements and the need to continually plan for the future, Costick said.

"WITH ALL the rapid growth, the expectation of the taxpayer is that they want to see the tax rate cut. In the long run, we will do well. But in the short term, the demands of rapid growth have put tremendous demands on the city's infrastructure (roads and facilities, for example) and employees," he said.

To keep in step with increased development, city officials have used what they call a "diverse approach." That has involved adding personnel when necessary and contracting for outside services to hold the line on further hirings.

Overtime is also used, especially in the departments — engineering, zoning, building — that process much of the building activity. Temporary help is used during certain times of the year, such as tax time and elections.

In the 1986-87 budget, Farmington Hills City Council authorized the creation of new positions. They include two engineering inspectors, two Department of Public Works (DPW) laborers, one in the Department of Special Services/Parks and Recreation, three librarians and one deputy fire chief.

Nine police department positions — six officers and three cadets — were added to keep up with in-

creased calls. In 1985, police calls increased about 13 percent.

THE POSITION of assistant city manager was recently established to work with road improvements and future planning of improvements and facilities.

In 1985, eight new positions were created: two assessors, two police officers, one police department clerk, a finance department clerk, a building inspector and a DPW clerk. Over the past two years, three positions have been added to the 47th District Court.

"Our overall focus has really been in achieving as much productivity without increasing the number of employees," Costick said. "The problem is that with all the construction activity, the demands on the city in resolving conflicts between new developments and existing neighborhoods, compliance with codes, processing... It just creates real burdens."

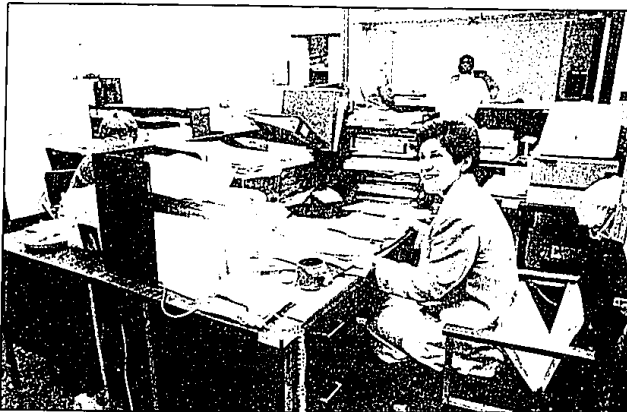
To avoid adding more positions to the city's payroll, officials have contracted for outside services in certain areas.

To diminish delays that have been occurring with engineering inspections, for example, an engineering consulting firm was hired. The firm has devoted three of its employees to working the Hills, Costick said.

Some DPW areas have also been partially contracted out, such as street sweeping, catch basin cleaning and street line painting and snow removal. Data processing is another function city officials have found to cost less when a consulting firm is hired.

"JUST LITERALLY every office — finance, clerk's, parks and rec — all are experiencing the pressures of this kind of growth," Costick said. "You can never respond adequately to citizen complaints or inquiries."

"Along with growth, complaints increase. But that's our job — to solve problems — look ahead and ensure the community is developing in an orderly way. But it has happened so fast. It would be nicer if it



RICK SMITH/staff photographer

It's not unusual to see every nook and cranny in Farmington Hills City Hall inundated with files, papers and reports. With a desk filled to

the brim, Leah Blizman in the zoning department finds one more place to store files — her chair.

had been spread out."

The community's growth has placed increased space demands on city facilities, particularly the police building and city hall.

Construction is continuing on a new 34,000-square-foot police facility to replace the current 7,500-square-foot police station. City offices are crowded with staff, records, files and equipment.

"Our conditions are really crowded. People are just crammed in like sardines," Costick said. "We hope to move into the new building in November. We're working now to draw up plans, at minimum expense, to re-

furbish the old police building and add at least 6,000 square feet of office space. And storage space will be added."

While trying to keep pace with growth, city officials are looking at the need for immediate and long-term improvements, particularly roads.

"I am concerned with all this rapid growth that we are at a point where we are not planning properly. We are already behind in our improvements. We need to devote time to getting other agencies involved. Roads, for example, is the big issue. Everyone is concerned about the quality of life."

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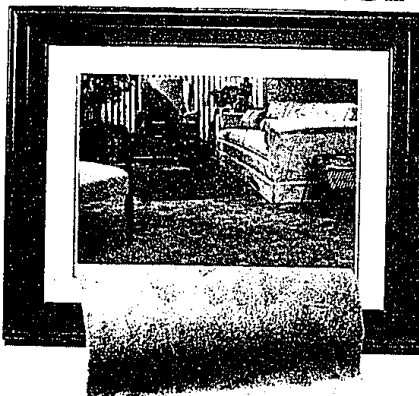
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