

Apartment building pushes up housing starts

BY JOHN D. MCCLAIN
AP NEWSWIRE

WASHINGTON (AP) — Housing starts in November posted the biggest gain in a year, but the increase was limited to apartments as the lowest mortgage rates in nearly two years failed to boost single-family construction.

Analysts said severe weather and the slowing economy probably also reduced single-family activity in much of the nation in December and January.

"Seasonally, we expect bad weather, but this has been an unusually bad winter," said economist David Lereah of the Mortgage Bankers Association.

"So it's hard for builders to dig holes and get trucks and cranes going in many parts of the country."

Joe Blalock, an economist with America's Community Bankers, said that even with lower interest rates, growth in housing this year probably will be held back by declining consumer confidence and reduced demand after more than four years of economic recovery.

Construction of new homes and apartments jumped 5.7 percent in November, to a 1.42 million seasonally adjusted annual rate, the Commerce Department said Tuesday. Activity was mixed regionally, rising in the Midwest

and South but falling in the Northeast and West.

It was the department's first economic report since much of the government was shut down Dec. 16 by the federal budget impasse and then the blizzard. The report had been scheduled for Dec. 19.

The gain was the biggest since a 5.9 percent surge in November 1994 and boosted starts to the highest level since a 1.43 million rate last July.

But the unexpectedly strong advance was a rebound from a 4.6 percent decline in October, when starts plunged to 1.34 million, lowest since 1.30 million last June.

Construction of single-family homes — 80 percent of starts — remained unchanged in November at a 1.1 million rate after falling 3.2 percent a month earlier.

Still, economist David F. Sealors of the National Association of Home Builders described the rate as "very good."

Many analysts had expected single-family starts to level off after rebounding from last winter's doldrums, when mortgage rates rose above 9 percent. Thirty-year fixed-rate mortgages averaged 7.35 percent in November, lowest monthly average since 7.16 percent in February 1994.

The monthly payment on a

\$100,000 mortgage with a 7.5 percent interest rate is \$699, while the payment on the same loan with a 9 percent rate is \$805 — a difference of \$106.

Construction of apartments and condominiums, which is volatile and not as interest-sensitive, shot up 32 percent in November, to 318,000, after falling 11.1 percent a month earlier.

Total starts in November were 7.6 percent below the 1.64 million rate a year earlier. For the first 11 months of 1995, they were 7.4 percent below the same period in 1994.

Applications for building permits — often a gauge of future activity — rebounded 3.2 percent, to a 1.43 million annual rate, up from 1.38 million in October when they fell 1.5 percent. Single-family applications were up 1.6 percent.

Regionally, starts shot up 14.5 percent in the South, to a 885,000 rate, and 18 percent in the Midwest, to 313,000.

They plunged 22.9 percent in the Northeast, to 91,000, lowest since 89,000 in January 1994. They were off 5.4 percent in the West, to 331,000.

Lead pipes in older homes may cause health problems

The beautiful old house you just bought to renovate and fill with character may also have tap water loaded with lead. Many people are aware of lead in older paint, but may not be aware of lead in older plumbing that can contaminate drinking water and have permanent effects on physical and mental health.

A recent trend indicates that younger house buyers lean toward certain elements of charm and character in a house, qualities such as hardwood floors, high ceilings and archways that are mainly found in older houses. Unfortunately, these older houses and apartments built before 1930 are very likely to have older plumbing. Older plumbing used solder that has a high lead content, which can leach lead and cause high concentrations of lead in drinking water. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has found that lead in drinking water is one of the leading sources of lead in the bloodstream, contributing to 20 percent of total lead exposure for an average person.

Most drinking water is naturally lead free. Lead leaches into water when it sits in a house's pipes. Unfortunately, lead is a colorless, odorless, tasteless hazard, and the full extent of its harmful effects are not yet known. For infants and children, the effects of lead ingestion can begin with premature birth and low birth weight. Lead poisoning can also be linked with slowed mental and physical growth, decreased intelligence and other measures of cognitive function, such as attention span. Anyone at any age can experience damage to the nervous system, red blood cells and kidneys, elevated blood pressure and hearing loss.

Those most at risk include infants, children under age six, pregnant women and adults exposed to lead in their workplace. Children are at the highest risk of lead ingestion because they play in the dust and dirt, put things in their mouths, and drink a higher percentage of liquids. Their bodies are small and tend to absorb more lead into their bloodstreams. Infants and toddlers can be at higher risk due to juices and formula mixed with water.

Recent studies by Harvard University doctors at a lead poisoning clinic in Boston found that the primary source of lead in the bloodstream of about 16 percent of lead-poisoned infants treated at the clinic was from lead-tainted drinking water used to make formula.

The EPA has set a lead limit of 15 parts per billion (ppb). Reaching or exceeding this limit forces public water systems to reduce and monitor lead levels, and notify the public of elevated lead levels. To illustrate how small 15 ppb is, consider that 1 ppb is about equal to 1 drop in 33,000 gallons of water. Just fifteen drops in a large swimming pool would

reach the lead action level. This shows how toxic lead is, even in very small quantities.

Fortunately, simple tests, performed by an independent water testing lab, can determine the lead level and overall water quality in your house. Once you know whether lead exists, there are several ways to reduce or remove it, thus improving water quality.

One of the easiest ways to reduce lead levels is to let your tap water run cold for 30-60 seconds to flush out any lead that has leached into water standing in the pipes. Hot water tends to draw out more lead so if you need hot water, the best idea is to take cold water from the tap and boil it on the stove.

To ensure that lead is being removed from tap water, you can install a lead-removing water filter. "If you purchase a lead-removing filter, be sure to work with a reputable company that can help you decide which system is best for you," said Dick Elliott, president of EcoWater Systems, the world's largest manufacturer of residential water treatment systems. "Ask whether the product has a seal of approval from a recognized independent testing lab. Also ask if there are performance data sheets giving detailed breakdowns of exactly how much lead and other contaminants are removed by filtration. Finally, ask about the refund policy in the event you decide to return the filter. Some companies offer a no-questions-asked refund policy up to 90 days after purchase."

There are three primary types of lead-removing filters. The first is an ion-exchange filter, which is the least expensive and removes lead by filtering water through a resin that breaks down and absorbs impurities, including lead.

A distillation system raises the water temperature to boiling, turns the water into vapor and leaves contaminants behind. The water vapor enters a condenser where it returns to a liquid state. This system is moderately priced and removes up to 95 percent of all contaminants.

Reverse osmosis filtering systems force pressurized water through a semipermeable membrane with microscopic pores. This membrane rejects contaminants suspended in water. While these are the most expensive option, they remove up to 98 percent of the lead.

So, as you're inspecting your new house for authentic woodwork and high-quality hardwood floors, be sure you also check those water pipes. Not everything crafted in the old days is better; some things need to be brought up to date.

For more information on water quality testing and treatment, get EcoWater free educational booklet, "The Water in Your Life," by calling 1-800-86-WATER.

To attract more hummingbirds you need to know your plants

BY JAMES E. WALTERS
AP NEWSWIRE

If hummingbirds are present in your garden and you want more, determine which plants they visit and add to the supply.

They are such an aerial delight that certain plants are worth growing just to attract them. They are attracted to a long list of common flowers, shrubs and trees. Some likely candidates: bottlebrush, lantana, honeysuckle, hollyhock, penstemon, pink, philo, salvia, morning glory, bird of paradise, acacia, lobelia, ocellio, columbine, larkspur, petunia and sage.

Start by determining what plants survive in your climate and will be in flower when hummingbirds are likely to be present.

Brilliant colors, mostly red, attract them because they stand out the most in daytime. Yellow and orange do just as well in the shade.

In my garden, they love tubular-shaped flowers, especially the purple and white ones of desert willow (Chilopsis) and the yellow bells of Tecoma. Red salvia and red penstemon seem to be their favorites among flowers. Among shrubs, their first choice is usually the bright-red flowers of Zauschneria latifolia, whose common name is hummingbird trumpet.

Flowers in the blue spectrum of colors are believed to be more visible to bees and similar pollinators.

The typical hummingbird flower has a long floral tube into which they, but not much else, can reach.

They supplement a high carbohydrate diet by capturing spiders off plant tips or capturing

■ The typical hummingbird flower has a long tube into which they, but not much else, can reach.

insects in flight. Another plus: berries and fruits do not appeal to them.

The rapid motion of their wings enables them to hover. They obtain nectar and tiny insects by thrusting their needlelike bills into flowers. Pollen brushes off onto the body as they feed and is transferred to the next flower they visit. Many such flowers are in turn specialized to ensure their pollination results from hummingbird activity.

In general, flowers pollinated by hummingbirds have little or no fragrance.

While they look fragile, they can be downright aggressive to larger birds.

They aren't constantly in flight, stopping on small branches, and seem to take frequent advantage of opportunities to rest.

With the exception of the East's ruby-throated, nearly all of this continent's hummingbirds are residents of Western states. They are about 3 inches long.

Most migrate overland from Mexico or Central America in the spring although the red-crowned, green-feathered ones — known as Anna's — are likely to spend all year in subtropical areas of Arizona and California.

Besides the Anna's and ruby-throated, the more common hummingbirds are Allen's, black-chinned, broad-billed and rufous.



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