

Construction sector feeling the worker crunch

By **DELON SHURTZ**

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Homeowners hoping to build a house before autumn, but who haven't even started yet, shouldn't get their hopes up.

The labour market in Lethbridge is so tight it takes at least six months to build a home, and that doesn't include prep time, which can add another three or four months to the process.

Still, the labour market isn't as tight as it is in Calgary or Edmonton, where homeowners can wait for a year or more before they can move in to their new abodes.

Bruce Galts, president of the Canadian Home Builders' Association, Lethbridge region, blames the lengthy building process on the shortage of skilled labourers, particularly in the trades.

"It's hard to find people," he says. "Hard to find good people."

It's the result of Alberta's super-heated economy which has left a severe shortage of workers across the province, along with record low unemployment rates.

And while it's not quite as bad as it was one or even two years ago, skilled workers are still scarce. Employers, especially in the construction industry, are feeling it.

Galts expects the labour market in Lethbridge to cool in time.

Meanwhile, he still predicts residential construction to hit its third-highest level ever, trailing only the past two years.

"It'll be in the ball park."

That means there could be as many as 1,000 home starts this year.

"It is tough to predict."

Galts notes Calgary and Edmonton are beginning to slow down, although they are still strong, and Edmonton is actually doing better of the two in home starts and sales.

Although the construction industry is strong and job opportunities are plentiful, Galts says the rate of inflation is hurting homebuyers, especially first-time homebuyers.

"Affordability is the real problem."

Builders are frustrated with the long build times: up to nine or 10 months in

Lethbridge, including planning time, and more than a year in Calgary and Edmonton. Two or three years ago, a home could be built in six months, including prep time.

Colin Ward, president of the Lethbridge Construction Association, describes current conditions in two words: "It's busy."

He points to projects such as the expansion and renovation of the Enmax Centre, Lethbridge College, University of Lethbridge and Chinook Regional Hospital. There are also the planned new firehall and the westside school complex, as well as numerous private projects including banks, big box stores, restaurants and doughnut

shops.

Ward suggests as more people move to the Lethbridge area — many escaping the hustle and bustle of Calgary and Edmonton — public and private development must increase

to support their needs. The more amenities a community has, the more attractive it becomes as a place to live and work.

"It's starting to feed its own," Ward says. "It's kind of like a cycle."

And the cycle is expected to keep on rolling along.

"I don't see any sign of it slowing down at all."

That doesn't bode well, however, for an industry which will lose many of its skilled, yet aging, tradesmen.

Finding skilled labour remains a challenge, and the problem is expected to increase as an aging workforce retires and takes with it vast years of knowledge and expertise.

"The writing's on the wall as far as retirements coming."

Sean Miles, director of business development and operations for Economic Development Lethbridge, agrees.

As the baby-



generation retires, pressures on the labour market will continue. He suggests it will be necessary to recruit aboriginal workers and workers from out of the province, and even from out of the country, to retain production and encourage business expansion.

“In addition, opportunities for maximizing the labour force with disabled workers and re-employing retired workers on a part-time basis will need to be an on-going emphasis for companies to maintain and expand their operations,” Miles says.

He says the large number of construction projects slated to begin this summer should continue for several years, which will result in a drop in the unemployment rate, at least in the short term, and increase competition for workers.

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IAN MARTENS
Michael Yanos and
Darcy Shurtz work on a
home being construct-
ed in Coaldale.

