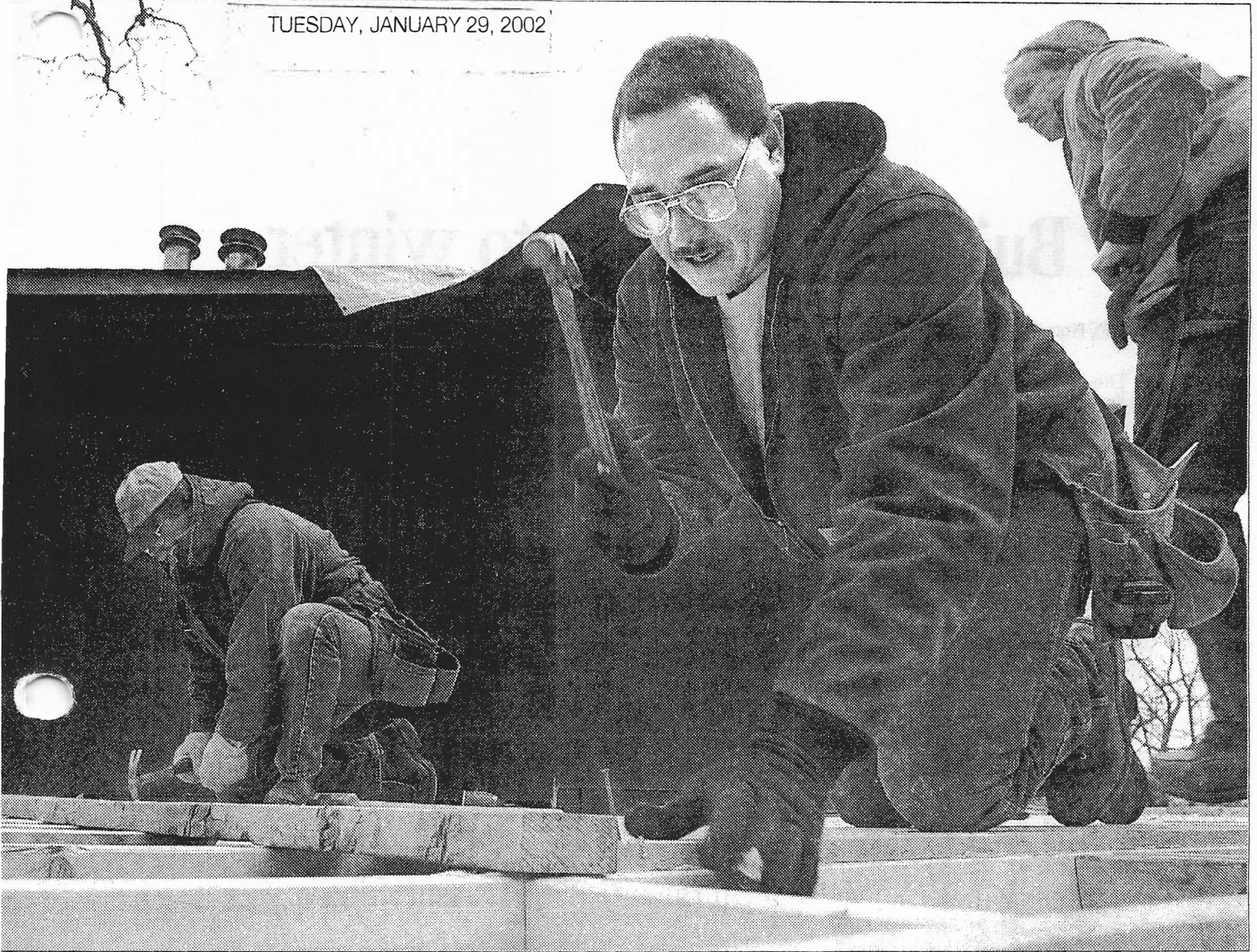


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Construction warming up to winter

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MARY JO WALICKI / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

ave Lau of East Troy (left), Joe Herriges of Eagle (center) and Bob Herriges of East Troy work on framing a house Monday in Mukwonago. The warmer-than-usual winter weather has helped builders move forward rapidly on area projects and keep more contractors on the job, construction officials say.

With mild temperatures, lack of snow, frost, projects speed along

By RICK BARRETT
of the Journal Sentinel staff

Construction projects that normally wouldn't start until spring, or would stall in the winter, are speeding ahead as a result of almost no snow, little ground frost and mild temperatures.

"We are not being beaten down by the weather, for a change," said Mike Fabishak, executive vice president of the Associated General Contractors of Greater Milwaukee.

The weather has enabled builders to stay outdoors longer than usual and has added to productivity, according to Fabishak and others.

Workers are having to spend less time protecting job sites from the snow and ice, and less time setting up heaters to stay warm. And, not being constrained by layers of heavy clothing, they're able to get around easier.

"People are more productive when they don't have to fight the weather," Fabishak said. "It changes your mood."

Area construction activity is down about 5% from a year ago, mostly because of the completion of large projects, such as Miller Park, and the recession that has crept into the building industry.

But builders pulled permits for

230 new dwellings in metro Milwaukee last month, up 22% from a year earlier, capping 2001 with 4,954 permits — a 7.6% increase over 2000.

"We did remarkably well in December," given the economy, Fabishak said. "And there's no doubt that because of the weather this winter, projects have been started that would not have been started a year ago," when several feet of snow were on the ground.

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Builders warm up to winter

BUILD, From 1D

The mild weather has helped keep carpenters employed, said Jeff Dziedzic, executive secretary-treasurer of the Milwaukee and Southern Wisconsin District Council of Carpenters.

About 200 of the union's 3,800 active members are on layoff. But as many as 600 are out of work some winters, according to union officials.

"We have carpenters working 40 hours a week, when normally they wouldn't be getting that many hours this time of the year," Dziedzic said.

Only about 15 of 700 union bricklayers in the area are on lay-

off, said Ken McLaren, field staff representative for Bricklayers Local No. 8 and Allied Craftsmen District Council.

"That's rare for this time of the year," he said.

The weather, somewhat colder than last week, is ideal for underground excavation, said Bill Carity, a Brookfield developer and former president of the Wisconsin Builders Association.

"Ideal conditions are right around freezing, so that machines don't sink in a sea of mud, but you don't have to dig through several feet of frost," he said.

Weather that fluctuates wildly is hard to deal with as the ground freezes and thaws, added Mike Coello, general manager of Coello

& Associates, a Waukesha contractor.

"It's the in-between conditions that are difficult," he said.

Mild weather has helped lower some construction costs, such as heating, said Howard Rowell, president of the NARI/Milwaukee Home Improvement Council Inc., which represents home builders.

Painters and roofers have been able to complete more work this winter. Also, it has been easier and less expensive to pour concrete that cures better in warmer temperatures, contractors said.

"We are getting a lot more work done than usual this winter," and it will help ease a backlog of projects in the spring, Rowell said.