



Bill Korway/Daily Southtown

Dawn McKenna, the new president of the Southwest Suburban Home Builders Association, shows off a home she is involved in remodeling.

A brand new start

By Burney Simpson
Business Writer

Public service, visibility and getting their members' interests heard top the agendas of the new presidents of two area building associations.

"I want to get our name out there to the general public so they know we exist," said Dawn McKenna, who was sworn in as the new president of the Southwest Suburban Home Builders Association in December. McKenna is owner and president of Artisan Builder in Orland Park.

Thomas Wunderlich will become the president of the Will-Grundy County Home Builders and Associates in January.

"We need members to go to state and city meetings. If a red flag comes up, something that can impact our business, we can address that and get it changed," said Wunderlich, president of the Milton F. Wunderlich Construction Co. of Joliet.

McKenna's Artisan is an 11-year-old remodeling firm. McKenna designs the projects and hires the contractors. Artisan has worked on projects in Downers Grove, Hinsdale, LaGrange, Palos Heights, Matteson, Orland Park and Orland Hills.

She points to a 1999 project done as

Two area building associations welcome new presidents

a public service as the type of work the organization should continue. Members volunteered their labor and construction supplies to build a 310-square-foot wheelchair-accessible addition to an Orland Hills home.

And she'd like to see a decision made on a permanent home for the association, which now rents offices near the Orland Square Shopping Center.

"We'd like to either purchase a piece of property and build, or purchase a building and move in," McKenna said. "Our second largest expense is rent, after salaries."

Another priority is adding members to the 400 already on board.

Wunderlich, too, would like to strengthen the membership of his group.

"Lately the reputation has been that it's a social club. I'd like to get back to basics," Wunderlich said.

He is grounded in the organization. His father was a co-founder of the local chapter of the builders associa-

tion and has served as president.

The Wunderlich firm is a 49-year-old general contractor that has done commercial and residential work in Crest Hill, Lockport, Manhattan, Romeoville and Shorewood. One project under way is the New Century Credit Union on Springfield Avenue in Joliet.

Wunderlich would like the association's 180 members to act as watchdogs for their interests. He said they successfully fought a 1999 proposal by the Will County Building Department that would have required a sophisticated sprinkler system in new homes.

"They said it would raise costs \$10,000 to \$12,000 on average per house. We found it would cost \$20,000," Wunderlich said. "We went to the meeting, protested it. And it was defeated."

McKenna and Wunderlich agree that builders need to sit down with local officials to ensure their interests are represented.

"We need to meet with municipal building commissions to discuss items like building codes, for example," McKenna said. "We don't want to be adversarial."

The codes are a big topic for Wunderlich too. But he is realistic that trying to make them more uniform is a long-range project.

"Every state has its own code. Then every city, village and town in Illinois may add to it. It's a constant battle," Wunderlich said.

Both think next year could be good for construction, though a bit weaker than the torrid pace of the past few years. The real growth could be in remodeling.

"Generation X and Y have bought homes and now they will be remodeling," Wunderlich said.

"Locally, things will slow down, but there won't be a recession," McKenna said. "Those who are thinking of moving will stay put and remodel instead."

But the area will remain very attractive. Buyers still want to get the most for their money. And that means coming out of Chicago, Wunderlich said.

"For \$210,000, you can get a two-story house in Joliet with a two-car garage and three bedrooms," Wunderlich said. "You can't get that in Chicago."