



Meter reads moisture level in the wood beneath an EIFS-clad home in St. Charles.

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■ *There's a move afoot in Chicago to ban EIFS—exterior insulation and finishing systems—for residential use after homes suffer damage.*

Synthetic stucco battle rages

There is fierce crossfire on the issue of synthetic stucco, technically called EIFS for exterior insulation and finishing system.

Many homeowners across the country have suffered damage from water that penetrated their EIFS and caused rotting on the inside of walls. EIFS producers defend themselves on their own Web site, *eifsfacts.com*. Homeowners victimized by shoddy EIFS jobs also have a site, the similarly named *eifsfacts.org*.

Within the construction industry, EIFS manufacturers, builders and EIFS subcontractors all reject responsibility for problems and point a finger at the other guys.

In the Chicago area, the issue is even more complex as market share and unions jobs are at stake. Brickmakers and bricklayers rail at EIFS, which is taking market share and jobs away from them. On the other hand, plastering companies and the plasterers union, which do much of the EIFS installation, don't want to lose business, as might happen if Chicago bans EIFS.

A city ban on EIFS has been proposed, the idea being introduced by Ald. Tom Allen (38th), who is said to have strong ties to the masonry industry. If Chicago bans EIFS, it's possible many suburbs would follow suit.

EIFS has taken over from brick as the single most popular exterior cladding product in commercial construction nationwide, and many residential developers swear it's a top-notch product, so it obviously has its fans.

In an attempt to sort out this ap-

parent contradiction, I talked to John Salvatore, president and CEO of Senergy Inc. in Georgia.

Senergy is the only major EIFS producer to deal with homeowners class-action suits by offering a national settlement. It now sells only the new water-managed EIFS system for residential use, discontinuing sales of the old barrier type for that market. The new type allows any penetrating water to seep out via weepholes, thus avoiding interior damage.

Salvatore made major distinctions between the ways EIFS is applied on commercial vs. residential projects.

In commercial work, EIFS application has "an awful lot of oversight," he said. Job specs are spelled out in detail, and architects, engineers and independent inspectors or manufacturer's inspectors can oversee the application work, he said. The chance of poor work thus is minimized.

In residential construction, there often are no detailed specs for EIFS, and with the fast pace of work, little opportunity for inspection, he said.

Senergy won't take the chance that somebody else won't apply its EIFS product correctly, Salvatore said, so for residential work it requires the water-managed type in case flashing and caulking fail and water gets in.

Chicago-based USG Corp. also dropped barrier EIFS and pioneered water-managed EIFS, said James Furman, USG field sales manager for Chicago. It learned from its experiences in North Carolina, where it settled class-action suits, that water always wins out and that the barrier sys-

tem was inherently flawed.

Other companies, however, still make barrier EIFS for homes, although they don't recommend it for residential work.

I also talked to Matt Duguid, president of William A. Duguid Co. in Mount Prospect, the builder who first introduced EIFS to the Chicago area some 20 years ago.

"It's a good product if it's installed correctly. The biggest problem is that it's not installed correctly," he said. Although his company always has had good experience with EIFS, he rarely uses it on residential construction any longer.

Why? He can't be competitive on cost, he said. It costs him \$7 to \$8 a square foot for material and trained union labor, whose work is carefully inspected. But there are guys out there who charge \$5-\$6 a square foot, he said.

"There are too many people out there doing this stuff and doing it wrong," he said. "Everybody thinks they know what they're doing, that they know all the secrets—and they don't."

Is a ban on use of EIFS the solution for residential frame construction? Cliff Kapson, who runs EnviroSpec Inc. in Northbrook, an EIFS inspection service, thinks barrier EIFS should be discontinued because of its obvious shortcomings. He hesitated to use the term "ban." It's just semantics, he said, but he thinks use of the term would stigmatize current owners of EIFS homes, whose value might drop. Real estate agents and owners, however, should be required to divulge the presence of barrier EIFS, he believes.

The new water-managed EIFS should be given a chance to prove that it works, he said.

Ald. Allen originally proposed ban-

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ning all types of EIFS for residential frame construction. "Drainable system works in theory, but I'm not sure it's cured the problem," he said.

I don't know what's going to happen to Allen's proposal, as a lot of body punching is going on behind the scenes. At least one knowledgeable observer believes water-managed EIFS will be spared.

Is a ban too harsh? Outside of a ban, what other solution is there? How about municipal inspection of the construction site?

Municipal inspectors (for plumbing, electrical, etc.) give their stamps of approval to each suburban house as it's being constructed.

Could this be done for EIFS? Municipal inspectors would have to be trained, and perhaps new inspectors hired, but few, if any, municipalities would be willing to do this. But what about suburbs hiring independent inspectors like Kapson to check the work, billing the contractor for the cost? That sounds more workable.

Regardless, if I were buying a new or existing house with EIFS, I'd make the sale contingent on the house passing the inspection of an independent EIFS inspector that I picked out, with the cost to be footed by the builder or sell-

er. Actually, that sounds like the best solution, even if bans start to be enacted. A ban would affect future construction, but wouldn't address the thousands of homes already clad with EIFS.

If I owned a home with barrier EIFS, I'd have it inspected annually, and tackle any damages immediately.

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