Editor’s Note: Dorothy Roberts was elected President of the Exterior Insulation Manufacturers Association (EIMA) at their April board meeting in Toronto. Mrs. Roberts is CEO and chairman of Pleko Products, Inc., Tacoma, Washington, a manufacturer of interior and exterior wall coatings.

Mrs. Roberts’ experience includes 20 years as a management consultant, six years as vice president and corporate real estate director of a multi-state restaurant chain, and seven years as vice president of the Roberts Group, a construction specialties holding company. She holds a B.S. degree in chemistry and psychology from the University of Pittsburgh.

She has been a director or officer of EIMA since 1987, most recently as secretary. She has been active on EIMA’s Technical Committee for five years and served as chairman of the EIMA Applicator Training Committee. She is a member of AWCI, serving on Technical Committee #7, and ASTM.

In addition to EIMA, Mrs. Roberts is a director of the Central Ohio Industrial Association and Northwest Counseling Services, a nonprofit mental health organization in Columbus, Ohio.

We spoke with her recently to find out her view of the current EIFS crisis and how EIMA is responding to it.

Construction Dimensions: As President of the Exterior Insulation Manufacturers Association (EIMA), you obviously have insight into the difficulties the industry currently faces. How does EIMA view the current attack on exterior insulation and finish systems (EIFS) taking place in the major model building codes?

Dorothy Roberts: The present attacks on EIF systems are coming directly from two specific competitive industry groups who are seeing a loss of market share for their products as a result of the increased acceptance of EIFS. Instead of going to market on the strengths of their products, they have chosen to try to legislate EIFS out of business through proposed changes to the building codes.

CD: How are competitive interests attempting to change the building codes?

Roberts: They have introduced proposed code changes to each of the three major model building codes that would require EIFS to meet some very demanding criteria. In the case of the radiant energy related fire criteria, there are no existing appropriate test procedures. In fact, there are not any performance criteria of this kind for any exterior wall cladding materials.

CD: If there are no existing test procedures that are appropriate, how will EIMA respond to these challenges?

Roberts: EIMA has undertaken a very extensive and costly research project to develop a scientifically based radiant heat test method. This test method will evaluate the performance of exterior wall systems with respect to building-to-building fire spread due to radiant heat exposure. EIMA
expects both the new test method and acceptance criteria proposed will apply to all types of exterior wall construction. We expect to recommend both a standard radiant heat test and a code change proposal to the code community by the end of 1990. So far, the research is just about on schedule.

CD: You mention a research project. Who is conducting the research?

Roberts: The radiant heat research project is under the direction of Fred L. Fisher, P.E., and his firm, Fisher Research & Development, Inc. He is assisted in technical review by Donald W. Belles, P.E., of Donald W. Belles & Associates, Inc. Belles will also be developing appropriate code language. Both of these companies have extensive experience and unblemished reputations.

The research has already developed a very sophisticated computer model which can tell a designer or building official what the level of radiant heat will be for any type of fire and any building separation distance.

All actual product testing will be conducted by Southwest Research Institute.

CD: Computer model development and product testing can be very expensive. How is the radiant heat testing program being financed?

Roberts: The initial funding for this project has largely been provided by significant contributions from EIFS manufacturers and voluntary contributions from industry suppliers. EIMA has received tremendous support from the total industry. Additional funding from the contractor firms who install these systems is still coming in and is most important to bringing this research to a successful conclusion.

This outpouring of support from all facets of the industry demonstrates outstanding commitment to these products which have a proven performance record of over 20 years in the U.S.

CD: Has EIMA published any information on the research and testing program?

Roberts: Yes. One of the goals of this program is to keep our members, the code officials and the industry informed of our progress. We have published a booklet specifically outlining the project and our objectives. The booklet is entitled “Radiant Heat Research: An Industry Commitment to Fire Safety,” and is available from EIMA, 30 Holley Street, Wakefield, RI 02879.

CD: Do you think that EIF systems will prevail in the building codes?

Roberts: I certainly do believe the industry will prevail. If we provide code officials with accurate and documented information with which to make their decisions, the EIFS industry will succeed in our objectives to keep EIFS as a viable, acceptable construction method without unnecessary and unfair code restrictions.

EIFS systems are high quality materials which are aesthetically pleasing, functional, durable and cost-effective. Because of their demonstrated value and performance history, EIFS have captured a large share of the competitive market. That is really what has prompted their proposed code changes.

CD: Do you think the EIFS industry will derive any value from this experience?

Roberts: I believe we have already seen some value from this issue. For the first time our entire industry—manufacturers, suppliers, distributors and applicators—has united around this issue and I believe you will see a more aggressive attitude in the marketplace.

CD: You say that the industry is united on this issue. Will EIMA be increasing its communications activities and the flow of information?

Roberts: One of our goals for this year is to significantly increase our communications to members, the industry and the public. An aggressive program, under the direction of our Marketing Committee, is under way through publishing literature, position papers, EIMA’s newsletter and industry magazines, such as Construction Dimensions, as well as to code officials.

In addition, EIMA has been working with the major model code bodies to develop acceptance criteria and with ASTM on consensus standards.

CD: What do you think the future holds for EIFS and EIMA?

Roberts: I believe EIFS will be fully accepted by all segments of the construction industry as a viable and exciting alternative to more traditional products for all construction—both new and renovation; commercial and residential. We will continue to grow faster than most building materials because of our demonstrated advantages.

EIMA, although still a relatively young trade association, has cemented its position as the industry spokesman. I see EIMA continuing to grow to become a force in the entire construction industry. We have demonstrated the willingness to work together for the benefit of the industry and to face the tough issues with a united front.