

Remodelers get boost from boomers

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NEW YORK - The small businesses that dominate the home remodeling industry are expecting robust growth in the next few years, thanks partly to baby boomers who want to remain in their homes.

Home remodelers say they've had a pickup in projects from boomers who are in or approaching retirement and are seeking to modify their houses. It's a trend known as "aging in place," an alternative to moving to smaller quarters or a warmer climate.

Many of these homeowners are hoping to make their surroundings easier to manage and safer in case they have health problems.

They're replacing bath-

tubs with walk-in showers, installing safety rails, widening doorways and building ramps — features known as "universal design" since they can be used by anyone, regardless of physical ability. Boomers are also redoing their kitchens and sprucing up other areas — since they're staying put, they want to enjoy their surroundings.

Zach Tyson estimates that 30 to 40 percent of his revenue is now coming from boomer renovations, up from 15 to 20 percent five years ago. Most of the projects come from homeowners who are healthy and mobile now, but want to be prepared if illness or injury hits.

Besides making bathrooms safer, they're enlarging rooms so wheelchairs or walkers can be



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used more easily, and also to give the rooms a more open feel.

"It's trending up, for sure," says Tyson, co-owner of Tyson Construction in Destrehan, Louisiana.

The oldest of the 76.4 million boomers — the generation born after

World War II — are turning 71 this year. As more of them retire and make decisions about where they want to live, there will be a great need for accessible housing, according to a report released in February by Harvard University's Joint Center for Housing

'aging in place'

Studies.

"A large share of these households live in older homes in the Northeast and Midwest, where the housing stocks have few if any universal design features," the study said.

The report predicts home improvement spending by homeowners 65 and older will account for nearly a third of the total amount of remodeling dollars by 2025, more than twice the portion that group spent in 1995-2005. Owners 55 and over already account for just over half of all home improvement spending.

"The boomer activity seems to be driving the market," says Abbe Will, a research analyst at the Harvard center.

That's a change from the past, when older homeowners generally handled

maintenance, repairs and landscaping but tended not to renovate. And some of the boomer-driven remodeling is coming from younger homeowners who expect their parents might later come to live with them and want to be ready, Tyson says.

The requests Tiffany and Bryan Peters get from boomer customers include replacing traditional turning doorknobs with lever handles that can be pushed down. Homeowners want motion-sensor light switches and faucets, and nonslip flooring. In bathrooms, they're replacing fixtures with models that are designed for people with disabilities — showers than can accommodate wheelchairs, and toilets at the same height as wheelchairs, Tiffany Peters says.