resulted in 200,000 square feet of unoccupied office space. With a market as soft as this, commercial construction firms have had to look elsewhere for work.

“We’ve gone into another market,” says Manning Billeaud Jr., president of J.B. Mouton & Sons Inc. The bulk of his company’s activities in the early 1980s were directed toward office buildings and multi-family dwellings, but new areas are now being pursued with encouraging results. More emphasis has been directed to municipal (wastewater treatment plants), civil (roads, foundations, drainage) and industrial work.

J.B. Mouton is now in the process of building its third wastewater treatment plant, a field the company went into in 1987 and one which helped fill the gap during the lean times. Billeaud doesn’t expect the market for office space to re-materialize anytime soon. "Not appreciably," he says. "Very few office buildings have been done." But, the remodeling of existing space is becoming more active and increasingly lucrative.

Another untapped source of commercial activity is industrial construction. This type of work was a relatively new strategy for J.B. Mouton, but the adjustment has been beneficial, says Billeaud. While most industrial complexes are located east and west of Lafayette, in Baton Rouge and Lake Charles, there are some notable exceptions in Acadiana.

Cabot Corp. has several carbon black plants in Franklin and Ville Platte, and Fruit of the Loom’s presence in several area parishes is also a boost. Iberia Parish is also home to a considerable number of fabrication facilities at the port, as well as the recently opened Newmont Thioiodk plant. Auto Zone, slated for construction in Northpark Industrial Park, and the Medical Products International Plant, to be built in Ville Platte, are other examples.

These projects suggest a reversal of past declines in the commercial construction arena. "In the area generally, it’s picked up over the last two years," Billeaud says. Statistics seem to bear out the trend. In 1984, a total of 163 new commercial building permits were issued throughout Lafayette city and parish, for a total of almost $49.5 million. By contrast, four years later, the number of permits fell to 28, representing only $2.7 million. Last year, for the first time since 1984, the tide turned, with 39 permits worth $7.3 million.

Margaret O’Donnell, director of the USL Center for Business and Economic Research, sees some encouragement in these numbers. Commercial construction is generally considered one of the last indicators to be affected during economic downturns. “With the backlash of our recent experience, that’s definitely going to be the last thing to come back. When commercial construction comes around, it’ll be an indicator of near-term stability,” O’Donnell says. “It’s a good indicator of future trends.”

While it’s still premature to predict the outcome for 1990, several upcoming projects point to a renaissance of sorts. The following jobs are scheduled to get under way before year-end. Approximate projected budgets are listed when available.

- Auto Zone — The project is estimated to cost $4 million, with bids being accepted April 25.
- Fruit of the Loom — Construction recently began on the new Abbeville plant. Well Construction of Lafayette is the contractor. A budget of $1.8 million covers the building and site work, and an additional $1.2 million will be spent for equipment.
- L.C. Penney at Acadiana Mall — Renovations to the former Sibley Brothers location will result in 120,000 square feet of space at the anchor spot. The project will be bid May 11.
- Lafayette Regional Airport — Bids for the final phase of airport terminal construction will probably be submitted in August. Funding of $2.4 million will be spent for equipment.
- The National Wetlands Research Center — It is to be located across from the Cajundome. Bids will be taken June 5 on the $9 million facility.
- New Iberia shopping center — The $10 million facility will be located at the corner of Lewis and Admiral Doyle. Anchors include Delchamps and Wal-Mart. Other tenants will be Lewald’s, Sanford’s Jewelry, Cato’s, Shoe Town, Alfa Video and Subway Sandwiches.

Construction should begin sometime in May, with bids to be awarded by the end of April. It is expected to open by Oct. 1.

- Target Loop Shopping Center — The entire complex should run $18 million, and bids for Toys “R” Us, an anchor tenant, were recently submitted.

Several Big Jobs Are Scheduled This Year.