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Construction boom keeps state trades workers busy

Commercial projects boost employment in building sector

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Metro Milwaukee's skyline is being transformed this year by a construction bonanza that is delivering full employment to several building trades.

"Steamfitters, electricians, boilermakers, ironworkers - they're all just blasting away. They got work like you wouldn't believe," said Lyle Balistreri, president of Milwaukee Building and Construction Trades Council.

How much work?

"Southeast Wisconsin has produced the largest construction market in the history of this state," Balistreri said.

Some contributors are: We Energies' \$2.3 billion coal-fired Oak Creek power station; the \$70 million Milwaukee City Hall rejuvenation; the \$810 million Marquette Interchange highway reconfiguration; the \$95 million Harley-Davidson Inc. museum complex; the \$494 million Columbia St. Mary's Hospital complex; the \$240 million Potawatomi Bingo Casino expansion; and the \$85 million addition to Northwestern Mutual Life Insurance Co.'s Franklin campus.

Metro Milwaukee firms won \$665.3 million in new construction contracts in the first half of this year, according to industry tracker McGraw-Hill Construction in New York. That pales in comparison with the \$936.7 million a year earlier, though 2006 contracts translate to 2007 work.

The Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development says 35,100 construction workers were on July payrolls, down 1,300 from a year ago because of widespread unemployment in the shriveled housing market. Commercial work is now the industry star.

"Just in the four-county area alone, we've got 15,000 people out there," Balistreri said. "The only guys I know who are slow these days are those in the residential arena. Everyone else is going great guns and with this building boom; some trades are looking for people."

Positions filled by commercial work

The International Brotherhood of Boilermakers' Local 107, which spans Wisconsin, has 350 members on the job plus 250 out-of-state colleagues, called travelers, said assistant business manager Patrick McMahon. They're busy building the boilers at the Oak Creek and Wausau power plants, fashioning a "bag house" to clean coal dust for a power plant in Alma and repairing boilers at paper mills in the Fox Valley and Wisconsin Rapids, McMahon said.

"We're in a stage like we were in the mid-'70s to early '80s, when Wisconsin was building power plants in Sheboygan and Kenosha - the last ones built, I think, until now," McMahon said. Given the sheer size of today's jobs, he said, "we're probably looking at several more good years."

The 2,500 members of Steamfitters Local 601, which covers a 14-county region that includes Milwaukee and Madison, may be working full tilt for up to a decade, said business manager Kevin La Mere.

"We do commercial-industrial work, and when they do well, we do well. Right now, everyone's doing well," La Mere said.

Steamfitter crews have been deployed this summer to several power plant jobs, three hospital construction sites, ethanol and biodiesel plants throughout southern Wisconsin, plus the Harley-Davidson and Potawatomi sites. Late this year, La Mere said, his workers will be among the first on the \$50 million Jones Island biodiesel plant construction.

"Once the ironworkers put the steel up, our crews move in," he said. "Plumbers do the waste and potable water lines, steamfitters do everything else - the gas, chemical and pressurized fluids."

Trades workers may be busy, but they worry. Sure, these high-profile jobs offer prestige and job stability - but only for a few years. Then what?

"I'd like to see more middle-sized jobs coming along. That's our meat and potatoes," said Fred Hultquist, business manager of the Bricklayers and Allied Craftworkers District Council of Wisconsin in New Berlin.

Among his Local 8 membership, Hultquist said 575 are working and 25 aren't. He reported fierce scrapping among employers for small commercial jobs, as industry regulars compete with out-of-work home builders and remodeling companies.

"You might get 20 contractors competing for one job. You got to figure (a bid) tight or you'll lose out. Whoever's the most desperate gets the contract," Hultquist said.

Dealing with a residential slump

Meanwhile, some skilled tradesmen are rethinking their residential sector careers.

Mike Mueller, business manager of International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers Local 494 in Milwaukee, has spotted the trend.

"With residential down for a year or so, some have taken classes and improved their skills to do commercial work. In commercial, we're at full employment," Mueller said.

The current post-boom housing slump is a cautionary tale, however, noted Mike Fabishak, chief executive officer for Associated General Contractors of Greater Milwaukee.

"Things are pretty strong right now, particularly on larger projects," Fabishak said. "But we're seeing a little leveling off. For some people, particularly as it relates to the \$500,000 to \$4 million range, it's a softening market. Construction has really been doing a lot of the heavy lifting on local employment the last couple years, as witnessed by the number of cranes you see around Milwaukee. There's still plenty of steam in that engine, but I don't think it will manifest itself as robustly next year."

When it's over, companies and workers alike may find solace in the reconfigured skyline they wrought, Fabishak said.

"It's a very subtle but integral part of everyone in this industry," he said, "that you pass some landmark and say, 'I helped build that.' "

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