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Commercial building abounds

As housing market still suffering from recession, construction firms find solace in bigger projects

JENNA MINK, *The Daily News*, jmink@bgdailynews.com

Across town, hammers are swinging, sawdust is flying and sweat is rolling. And many local construction workers are breathing a sigh of relief.

As several big projects get rolling in Bowling Green, commercial construction jobs keep workers busy – although residential work still lags.

“It really is the residential that’s slow,” said Anita Napier, CEO of the Builder’s Association of Southcentral Kentucky. “Commercial is holding pretty steady.”

Housing construction tends to be a cyclical process and, right now, home projects are tapering. The recession is partly to blame – people are more cautious and less enthusiastic about building or improving a home, Napier said.

On the other hand, businesses are always trying to upgrade, no matter the economic conditions.

“Regardless, people are always going to be looking for business opportunities, and business opportunities take business spaces,” Napier said. “You always have innovators and great thinkers that will help the local community.”

And many of those opportunities are springing up this summer. Construction is abundant at Western Kentucky University as the college erects its new College of Education and Behavioral Sciences building, rebuilds Snell and Van Meter halls and constructs more parking lots.

In the downtown area, a handful of projects are slated to begin and some have already started. A small retail building is going up on College Street across from the ballpark, which also is under construction as workers finish the park’s administrative offices. And a parking garage is set to stand next to the ballpark in the not-so-distant future.

Those projects have been “a blessing” to construction companies, such as Stewart-Richey Construction, company president Rodney Rogers said.

Rogers’ company is involved in many of those projects – helping build new structures at WKU, working on three university parking lots and taking part in downtown construction.

The recession, however, has still taken its toll. Rogers’ company experienced routine layoffs last winter and hired back about 50 fewer workers when warm weather returned. Rogers gets about 150 applications each month; many are underqualified.

“There’s a lot of people coming in to turn in applications who are probably laid off from factory jobs or other types of work and are just looking for any kind of work,” he said.

Still, his company employs about 350 people, all of whom are working on projects, he said.

“Life is good in Bowling Green,” he said. “There’s more publicly-funded work, but I think Bowling Green still has its construction going on.”

Similarly, Scotty’s Contracting and Stone laid off workers in December, but its 250 employees currently have work, said Alan Bryant, grade and drain manager.

At least half of the company’s paving jobs are state-funded work, and Bryant has seen an increase in the number of project bids, which is a good sign, he said.

“We’ve been fortunate. We’ve picked up a couple of projects here in the last few weeks,” he said. “That will hopefully help us carry through the next year.”

Still, residential work has slowed, he said.

“The home building hasn’t been going near as fast as it had three or four years ago,” he said. “We obviously don’t do as many driveways.”

Rogers has done some residential development work, but those jobs have halted.

“That residential development has basically come to a standstill,” he said. “It’s slowed down drastically in the last couple of years.”

But that’s not the case for local builder Bob Dillard.

“I’m actually finishing up several projects right now,” he said. “For me, it’s been OK. I know for a lot of people it hasn’t.”

Dillard primarily works in residential construction; he does several, upscale residential projects and is working on home remodels, lake and pool houses and is slated to begin more home constructions.

But the recession has impacted his business. Clients are more cautious these days, taking more time to evaluate their options.

“Some of the projects I have probably would have started earlier had the **economy** not been the way it was,” he said. “I was fortunate enough to have stuff going on at the time.”

Dillard is finishing projects he began before the recession hit its peak. He’s about to start three, new projects for the first time this year – a sign that confidence is beginning to return.

“I think people are starting to do things,” he said.