

Wyandotte County in the middle of historic construction boom

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Construction crews are far enough along at the new Sporting Kansas City stadium in western Wyandotte County that it's easy to imagine the intimate seating bowl filled with chanting soccer fans.

On the county's east edge, the shimmering, blue-green glass exterior of a new medical office building being built at the University of Kansas Hospital signals some stylish architecture has arrived on a medical campus dominated by beige concrete and brick.

Wyandotte County is enjoying a record-breaking commercial construction boom this year, defying the economic slowdown hampering the building industry nationwide as well as in much of the Kansas City area.

And for a carpenter like Toby Weir, the building activity in the county is reason to celebrate in an industry where the local unemployment level recently stood at 17.1 percent.

Weir was busy this week inside the spacious bar and lounge area at the soccer stadium that will be serving drinks and food to suite-holders when the facility opens June 1. He'd been without work for two months.

"It means a lot, because I was sitting at home before I got here," said Weir, of Independence. "This gave an opportunity to a lot of guys to come back to work."

Wyandotte County expects to issue \$303.7 million in commercial building permits this year, according to county data.

"This is obviously an aberration, because nationally the U.S. construction market is still quite in the doldrums, particularly nonresidential," said Kim Kennedy, manager of forecasting at McGraw-Hill Construction in Boston.

Buoyed by major projects near Kansas Speedway, including the stadium and Hollywood Casino, along with continued growth at the University of Kansas Medical Center and KU Hospital campus, this year will far surpass the \$198 million record set in 1985 when the General Motors Fairfax assembly plant was built.

And there are some big industrial projects in between, including Sara Lee investing \$38 million in a meat-slicing plant that will create 250 jobs, and Zeolyst International investing \$83 million in a plant that will add 33 jobs.

"The construction activity going on right now in nearly all parts of our economy couldn't come at a more critical time in our county, and most of these projects also will lead to permanent jobs," said Mayor Joe Reardon of the Unified Government of Wyandotte County/Kansas City, Kan.

The McGraw-Hill trade publication calculates construction activity differently from Wyandotte County, looking at construction starts rather permits. It reported that through October there were \$266 million in projects, up 71 percent from last year and up 207 percent from five years ago.

The trade publication also reported that Jackson County was experiencing a 250 percent uptick compared to last year, but most of that was attributed to the \$600 million replacement facility being built for the nuclear weapons parts plant operated by Honeywell.

On the other hand, Johnson County, the perennial metropolitan commercial construction powerhouse, has experienced a 44 percent decline from last year, and is down 65 percent from five years ago, according to McGraw-Hill.

Jeff Pinkerton, a senior researcher for the Mid-America Regional Council, said the investment at the Village West retail district near Kansas Speedway in western Wyandotte County had exceeded expectations.

"I think everyone thought that 10 years ago it was a great shot in the arm for Wyandotte County, but it's grown to be a great shot in the arm for the entire region," Pinkerton said.

Reardon and others cite the Wyandotte County construction boom as the result of sticking with a strategic plan laid out over a decade ago when county officials acquired 400 acres by what is now the auto racetrack to accommodate future development.

"You can attribute it to the public financing that's been made available and to the Unified Government administration that had the fortitude to take the risks," said Rory O'Connor, vice president, construction, for Sporting KC.

O'Connor is supervising the rapid progress on the \$175 million professional soccer stadium being built for Sporting Kansas City, formerly known as the Kansas City Wizards. The 18,000-seat stadium designed by Kansas City-based Populous architects is 55 percent complete and on track for a June 1 opening.

The seating bowl and structure housing the 36 suites and press box are completed, and the steel frame is in place for the canopy that will provide cover for all the fans while allowing in natural light for the grass turf.

Next up is interior finishing work and installation of all the electronics, including an 80- by 24-foot HD video board the size of six semitrailers.

The facility, one of only 10 soccer-specific stadiums in North America, is being built by Turner Construction.

"We think ours is a quantum leap ahead of the other facilities built so far," O'Connor said.

Work has moved at a brisk pace since it began last February. Lately, an average of 300 workers earning an average of \$55 per hour, including benefits, has been on the job site.

Like other construction projects that have managed to find financing in the tough economy, the stadium is benefiting from a hungry market. Only the best skilled workers are being hired these days.

"The availability of excellent crafts people allowed us to work at the speed we've been doing," O'Connor said. "If we'd done this three years ago, it would have cost us an absolute fortune."

Not far from the soccer stadium, the first steel of what will be the \$200 million Hollywood Casino at Kansas Speedway is rising. The 268,000-square-foot casino and accompanying 1,500-space garage are expected to open in early 2012.

And next year, Wyandotte County officials expect Cerner Corp. to begin work on an office campus for the medical software company that will ultimately house 4,000 employees. The Cerner jobs were part of the development deal signed by state and county officials last January that brought the soccer stadium to Village West from a site in Kansas City proposed earlier.

Compared to the wide open spaces of Village West, the building boom at the KU Medical Center and KU Hospital campus is practically claustrophobic.

Hospital staff, patients and students must navigate through construction zones, and equipment operators have to be nimble making tight turns on confined sites.

KU Hospital is in the middle of an \$85 million medical office building project and \$50 million addition to its Center for Advanced Heart Care. The KU Medical Center is spending \$41 million on several renovation projects, and building a \$9 million parking garage and \$8 million KU Endowment Association Building.

All this activity is being generated by steady increases in patient volume at the hospital and a push to bring a National Cancer Institute designation to the medical center.

“The university’s strength is being the center of the life science movement in the metro in addition to the Stowers Institute,” said hospital spokesman Dennis McCulloch.

The 214,000-square-foot medical office building, which also includes an orthopedic facility, is being built by Turner Construction. J.E. Dunn Construction Co. is building the 123,000-square-foot addition to the heart center. Local contractors doing interior work are McCown Gordon and United Excel.

Like his counterparts at the soccer stadium, Arthur Monk, an electrician from Belton, is pleased to be back at work. He and an electrician friend, Shea Huckabee of Kingsville, Mo., had been without work for many months.

They were now among the 200 people employed daily building the medical offices.

“Times were tough, and times are tough still,” Monk said. “Wyandotte County has bloomed. It’s good to have a steady paycheck and not rely on unemployment and be able to take care of health insurance.”

All the activity in Wyandotte Country during a lean time around the country has not gone unnoticed by the national construction industry. The Associated General Contractors of America recently ranked the county as No. 3 in the nation when it came to creating construction jobs.

According to the organization, Wyandotte County added 1,700 jobs over 2009 for a 9 percent increase in construction employment.

David Kendrick, executive vice president of the Greater Kansas City Building and Construction Trades Council, said each of those construction jobs echoed throughout the local economy.

“For every person you see performing work on a construction site, there are one to three people who have jobs in management, delivering materials or other work,” he said.

Jon Jackson, senior vice president overseeing construction at KU Hospital, said it was now Wyandotte County’s day in the economic sun.

“I know Wyandotte County is enjoying tremendous growth, about like Kansas City, Missouri’s, downtown a few years ago,” he said.

“To my way of thinking, it’s long overdue.”

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