



EXPECT MORE ... WE DELI

[current issue](#)[subscribe](#)[free e-newsletter](#)[advertise](#)[careers](#)[SIGN IN](#)

## Northwest Construction

Other Regions: Please Choose

[HOME](#)[NEWS](#)[FEATURES](#)[PROJECTS](#)[PRODUCTS](#)[PEOPLE & FIRMS](#)[TOP LISTS](#)[OPINIONS](#)[PHOTO](#)

### digital wire

This story was not reported, edited or fact-checked by RCP editors.

[View all news wire headlines »](#)

## Clark County, Wash. Contractors Busy, But Future Still Uncertain

08/08/2010

*The Columbian*Text size: **A** **A**

By Cami Joner, The Columbian, Vancouver, Wash.

Aug. 08--Commercial contractors say Clark County's half-empty glass of construction work is starting to look half-full again, with nearly \$800 million worth of projects under way and moving forward.

But with many of the largest projects finishing up in 2011, builders of stores, offices, highways and industrial space say they're keeping a constant eye on the horizon for work. Contractors are still trying to dig out from the economic hole made worse by competitive bidding wars for the trickle of projects that come on line. Even when they land the bid, it's still hard to be profitable.

"It's kind of bouncing along the bottom right now for contractors," said Mike Bomar, executive director of the Southwest Washington Contractors Association, which represents commercial general contractors and operates a construction plan center at 7017 N.E. Highway 99.

Long-proposed local developments remain mothballed, including upscale retail shops planned for The Landing at east Vancouver's former Evergreen Airport, a Walmart-anchored project in Orchards, and Killian Pacific's \$170 million Library Square.

After flat-lining on permits at the start of the year, June and July brought a few more blueprints into the contractor association's plan center for a smattering of projects -- from sidewalk and street improvements in La Center to a sewer facility in Longview, a commercial roofing project, a school restroom remodel in Vancouver and an estimated \$7.5 million addition to Camas High School.

Contractors hope to see more proposals in the second half of 2010, said Bomar, whose organization posts plans for both government and private development.

"The public works projects are key right now to keeping things going," Bomar said. "(Contractors) are trying to get some predictability going forward because they're having a hard time staffing and budgeting."

A slight uptick in the association's membership could indicate hope for the sector. The group grew by 10 members to 200 members in July. Its membership dropped to a low of 185 in 2009, when the industry was hit hardest by the recession. The association had 256 members at the height of the building boom in 2008.

For some contractors and their suppliers, surviving the downturn has required a reinvention of their business focus. Some have added areas of expertise, Bomar said. Others saw leaders retire, sell out or merge with the competition.

"We're in an economy where every contractor is trying to do every project right now," Bomar said.

In June, Peterson Cat purchased the Halton Co., the former dealer of Caterpillar construction equipment in Southwest Washington and Northern Oregon. In March, Schlecht Construction, which has offices in Kelso and Vancouver, partnered with Astoria, Ore.-based Bergerson Construction to apply for federal stimulus-funded contracts to build projects for the U.S. Coast Guard.

"It really was a redirection of our company entirely," said Larry Schlecht, president of Schlecht Construction.

Schlecht said the projects on the Washington coast and in the San Francisco Bay Area came just in time for his 25-year-old company, which had long focused on private design-build projects for small-business clients.

"There isn't enough work out there to keep a contractor healthy, and as such, we had to go to San Francisco to get work," Schlecht said, "That's hard to comprehend, but it is the real world now."

#### Signs of recovery

A trickle of new development continues feed the pipeline in parts of Clark County, such as east Vancouver's 192nd Avenue corridor, according to Dean Kirkland, co-developer of 192nd Avenue Plaza with business partner Tom Files.

Kirkland and Files expect their \$12 million retail complex to open this fall, fully leased. A larger, adjacent development, the \$50 million 192nd Avenue Station, could be under construction by the start of 2011. The project continues to generate interest from retailers, restaurants and health care providers, which Kirkland and Files take as a sign of business expansion and growth.

"The market has reconfirmed that there is significant interest in the site," Kirkland said.

Other developers hope signs of growth in the retail sector will be the precursor of more office, industrial and condominium projects.

"We're still a couple of years off," said Barry Cain, president of Tualatin, Ore.-based Gramor Development.

The company and a group of locally based private investors are planning a \$1.3 billion redevelopment of downtown Vancouver's 32-acre former Boise Cascade site. Cain said construction could be two or three years away for the waterfront residential project, which will include high-rise condominiums, a park, hotel rooms and retail and restaurant space.

In 2009, Cain predicted the waterfront project would create 12,000 construction jobs over its development time line. The work was scheduled to start in 2011 before the collapse of the market for residential condominiums.

Cain, whose company recently secured \$60 million in financing to build a retail center in Beaverton, Ore., said he sees construction lending as a sign that the market is stabilizing.

"The retail market is a little healthier than the office and condo market. That will take a little longer to get going," Cain said.

-----

To see more of The Columbian, or to subscribe to the newspaper, go to <http://www.columbian.com>.

Copyright (c) 2010, The Columbian, Vancouver, Wash.

Distributed by McClatchy-Tribune Information Services.

For more information about the content services offered by McClatchy-Tribune Information Services (MCT), visit [www.mctinfoservices.com](http://www.mctinfoservices.com), e-mail [services@mctinfoservices.com](mailto:services@mctinfoservices.com), or call 866-280-5210 (outside the United States, call +1 312-222-4544).

NYSE:CAT,

A service of YellowBrix, Inc.

By utilizing the content on this page, you agree to the [legal terms](#).

GreenSource

**ENR**  
Engineering News-Record

**Constructor**

Sweet's

---

[Terms of Use](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Advertise](#) | [Contact/About Us](#) | [Site Map](#) | [Assoc. & Industry Links](#)

© 2010 The McGraw-Hill Companies, Inc. All Rights Reserved

. .