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Arkansas Report

Boom or bust, earth doesn't shake in Arkansas

April 1, 2010

By *Candy McCampbell*

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Text size: **A** **A**

The boom wasn't as earth-shaking in Arkansas as it was in other states, but neither was the bust. And if things turn around later this year as expected, there won't be a big bump-up.



The \$40-million Nordex wind turbine manufacturing facility in Jonesboro, Ark., is now under construction by H&M Construction Co. Inc. of Jackson, Tenn., and is the first of two manufacturing plants for the site.



The \$43-million El Dorado High School will have three two-story classroom wings attached to a central core structure.

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"We are looking at a situation where it's going to be about the same" as last year, says Kathy Deck, director of the Center for Business and Economic Research at the Sam M. Walton College of Business at the University of Arkansas. "I do not see anything that would cause a dramatic upswing in the current year."

The recovery in Arkansas will be tied to the nation's recovery but will lag it "just a little bit," she says. But then "it lagged going in," Deck adds.

The recession has been shallower in Arkansas than in other states because of the state's economic mix, Deck says. Even unemployment has not been as drastic as elsewhere. It stood at 7.7% in February.

Construction job loss has been greater, down 14.7% from the peak, Deck says. That compares to more than 20% losses in other South Central states.

Doug Henson, president of the Associated General Contractors of Arkansas, reports a similar scenario. He says good and bad years are like parallel lines, usually running a mile apart, but in Arkansas that difference "is about 3 in."

By region, the state's northwest area has slowed from its leading-the-pack pace, the central area is slower but should start reviving in the third quarter of this year and the northeast is starting to pick back up, Henson says.

The slowdown has heated up competition at all levels, says Don Culpepper, president of Associated Builders and Contractors of Arkansas.

Bid lettings that once drew three firms now attract 18, which means those bidding on jobs are cutting costs as much as possible to land work.

Further evidence of the slowdown is the number of contractor licenses issued by the state. Those dropped almost 10% from 9,972 on Feb. 1, 2008, to 8,982 on Feb. 1 of this year, says Greg Crow, administrator of the Arkansas Contractors Licensing Board.

The much-discussed federal stimulus has helped road builders but few other firms, Culpepper says.

Deck calls the stimulus "a steadying factor" that is creating some jobs and saving others.

The state's court-ordered and governor-supported schools building program is work that Bob Shell, president of Baldwin & Shell Construction Co. of Little Rock, has gone after.

His firm has contracts in 13 school districts and for five college jobs.

Schools and colleges "are the ones that have got the money and can pay," Shell says.

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And schools are among the major projects under way in the state.

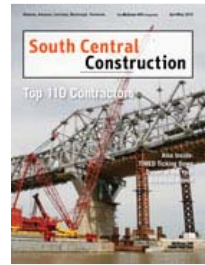
Oak Grove High School Replacement, Maumelle This new version of Oak Grove High School is basically five adjoining buildings – a pair of classroom wings, an administrative wing, a theater-style auditorium and a gymnasium and auxiliary gym, says Joe Lansden, project manager for Baldwin & Shell.

The \$56-million school, designed for 1,500 students, is a steel-frame building with an exterior of brick with metal panels.

The two-story classroom and administration wings have clerestory windows, a green design to add natural light. The school also is designed for earthquake resistance with a higher per-square-foot load requirement, Lansden says.


Work started in June 2009 and be finished for 2011 school year.

New El Dorado High School, El Dorado This \$43-million replacement high school has three two-story classroom...



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