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Strong demand for construction workers likely to swell further in storms' aftermath

By Marcia Heroux Pounds

South Florida's economy is being pumped up by new construction, but those projects could slow as the industry finds it can't hire the skilled workers it needs.

Seventy percent of construction firms nationwide report they're having a hard time filling openings for skilled construction workers, according to an August survey by Associated General Contractors of America.

Now, rebuilding efforts after catastrophic hurricanes and other tropical storms could put a further strain on the shortage. The Houston area is beginning to rebuild after Hurricane Harvey's recent damage. Meanwhile, Florida doesn't yet know the extent of wind and flood damage from [Hurricane Irma](#), forecast to make landfall in South Florida with tropical-force winds as early as Saturday.

Dave Rosenof, owner with his wife, Rhonda, of Big Dog Construction in Coconut Creek, say they already pay "substantially better than the union rate" for the skilled construction workers they need for projects in South Florida.

"We're always looking for carpenters," said Rosenof, whose firm does both residential and commercial building.

A few years ago, Texas storm damage may have driven a small army of Florida contractors to the state. Now, local construction firms say they have their hands full.

Michael Balter, regional managing partner for Marcum, an accounting firm that works with the construction industry, said none of his contractor clients has been talking about going to Texas for work.

"Because of all this work they have, they say, 'I don't need another job for another 12 months,' " Balter said. "They're completely booked."

One result of having plenty of work but not enough workers is projects can be slower to finish. "It's like accounting in the busy season, we only have so many people to get the work done," Balter said. So construction contractors do more negotiating of project start and completion dates, he said.

Rosenof said he also has trouble finding workers who possess the required skills. One recent worker claimed to be a tile setter, he said, but within a few days, it was clear he didn't have the skills. Rosenof said he hails from Midwest where worker training went hand-in-hand with a union card.

"Here, people are looking for plug and play kind of folks and there are a very few of them," he said.

In South Florida, the need for skilled construction workers has been acute ever since the construction industry began its recovery from the 2007-2010 recession and housing crisis, with new condominiums, multi-family housing, residential communities and office buildings being built throughout the region.

Statewide, specialty construction jobs are expected to grow by nearly 19 percent through 2024, according to Florida's Department of Economic Opportunity. In South Florida, job growth for construction trades ranges from 12 percent to 16 percent.

Stephen Sandherr, CEO for the Associated General Contractors of America in Arlington, Va., sums up the problem this way: "In the short-term, fewer firms will be able to bid on construction projects if they are concerned they will not have enough workers to meet demand ... over the long term, construction workers will have to find a way to do more with fewer workers."

But Sandherr also hopes that public officials will do more to encourage more people to pursue careers in construction.

Ken Simonson, economist for Associated General Contractors, said the construction worker shortage issue "has been long-standing."

The housing boom of 2001-2005 drew workers into construction, and then non-residential construction increased. Construction employment as a whole peaked in 2006. Then the housing crisis and recession hit in 2008 and 2009, and there were massive layoffs as projects stalled. Construction workers sought jobs in the oil and gas industry; some even changed careers.

Today, construction in South Florida is booming again, with new multi-family housing, residential communities and office towers being built.

"For the last 6½ years, the construction industry has been trying to catch up," Simonson said.

South Florida's construction and technical schools already are working hard to train as many new construction workers as they can to meet the state's demand.

"There's nothing we're going to be able to do in the short term to meet the labor demands coming down the pike," said Peter Dyga, president of Associated Builders & Contractors, East Florida chapter.

ABC expects to graduate more than 600 apprentices this year. They will be quickly placed in jobs with Florida contractors. The organization's Coconut Creek-based school is taking new enrollments now for construction training, and expects to have about 800 in its next apprentice program. There are programs in plumbing, pipe fitting, electrical, carpentry, and heating, ventilation and air conditioning. More information is available at <http://www.wetrain.org/>.

Dyga said the local chapter has been working to generate new construction workers by opening a storefront at Junior Achievement's Biz Town in Coconut Creek, where students visit to learn about different careers, and advertising at high school football games. That's increased the calls to the school by three to four times, he said.

He is hopeful there will be training dollars included in any federal infrastructure spending bill that Congress might pass. The Trump Administration proposed a \$1 trillion infrastructure spending bill in May.

Jack Bennings, director of workforce services for CareerSource Broward, said construction contractors are willing to train willing workers for future employment. "Contractors say, 'give me someone I can train and I will hire them in a heartbeat,' he said.

In July, Florida and Texas were among the two states that added the most construction jobs, according to Associated General Contractors of America. Florida added 35,800 jobs or 7.5 percent over a year ago; while Texas added 10,400 jobs, or 1.5 percent. Louisiana and Oregon also saw a high number of construction jobs.

AGC's national survey of 1,600 contractors, released Aug. 29, shows that construction firms have been increasing pay, providing bonuses or adding benefits to recruit and retain workers.

Dyga said construction worker demand will continue to put pressure on wages paid in Florida. But there is a silver lining.

"As labor gets tight, the already good salaries will even go up more, which helps attract more people to the industry," he said.