

The road to recovery: through construction

Recently, I had the opportunity to listen to an economic update speech given by a representative of the Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta that had a Jacksonville focus. The data shows that Jacksonville's economic slide was not as dreadful as the state average, but its recovery has not been posthaste.

The geographic areas that are recovering faster are those that are reconditioning the creaky and dilapidated construction industry. Not surprisingly, those same areas have highly ranked public school districts that have shown the most marked improvements.

At the risk of stating the obvious, all sectors of Florida's economy lost jobs during the recession — especially construction. From the peak of the mid-2000s boom to the trough of the "great recession," the construction industry in Florida lost 53.3 percent of its workforce.

From trough to present, however, the construction industry has added 4.2 percent more jobs. This was a huge swing.

While this is not the robust and hair-trigger recovery many had hoped for, it is a very enduring rate that substantiates projections credible industry analysts proffered. In fact, the 4.2 percent trough-to-present change for construction jobs in Florida trailed only five other sectors in positive change, with business services, education and health care and leisure and hospitality being the leading sectors of employment growth.

The statewide construction job growth numbers, however, do not comport with the last 12 months of local Jacksonville employment data. During that time, Jacksonville's construction industry continued to weaken, losing 3.9 percent of its workforce.

While the unemployment rate in Jacksonville is lower than the state and national average, the amelioration of local construction jobs continues to fall short of other sector expansion.

What does this mean to our local economy and our public resources? A strong construction industry tends to translate to more homes, more jobs (as manufacturing, professional services and transportation/utilities sectors tend to construction sector growth) and a stronger property tax base that generates revenue to support our local schools and communities.



Viewpoint

Charles B. Jimerson

Of the many challenges Jacksonville faces, I can personally opine that education is of paramount concern. Often parents of Duval County children reluctantly pay an extra \$15,000 and up per year "Duval County education tax" for private schooling rather than risk putting their children in a public school system that has been historically substandard.

I do not proclaim to know all of the solutions to the struggles of our local educational system, but common sense tells me that a healthier local economy would yield more resources for training teachers, cultivating vocational programs, driving policy-making accountability and promoting empowered families.

While it may not be the alpha and omega for long-term economic sustainability, the data shows that there is a substantial nexus between healthy educational and governmental programs and the strength of our local construction sector. It is now up to our elected officials and business leaders to adhere to Arnold Palmer's axiom, "the road to success is always under construction."

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