

For Builders, Schools Provide Steady Revenue

CONSTRUCTION: Strong market for educational projects in pandemic.

By **AMY STULICK** Staff Reporter

School construction is a safe bet for builders, seeing that the projects are considered an essential service by the state and the contracts last for years.

Companies such as **AMG & Associates Inc.** in Santa Clarita have seen large projects come their way despite the virus necessitating virtual administrative procedures. The public works contractor was hired in August for its largest project to date — a \$45 million fine arts complex at **Allan Hancock College** in Santa Barbara County.

AMG just finished another project on an elementary school in the same area too, President **Albert Giacomazzi** told the Business Journal. The contractor averages 12 projects per year, unchanged since the advent of the pandemic.

“So far, AMG has not been too adversely affected,” Giacomazzi said. “The virus is temporary and education is permanent. The attitude of the different school districts is that we have to keep these projects moving — we need to make sure that once the virus subsides enough and they are allowed to be on campus, that those facilities are ready for the faculty and students to arrive back on campus.”

But with school districts expected to conserve funds in the coming years, contractors such as **Bernards** in San Fernando say there may be a decrease in school projects put out



Busy: Santa Clarita-based AMG's William Libbon Elementary School in Santa Maria.

to bid.

“Six months from now jobs will drop off,” said **Rick Fochtman**, vice president of K-14 and management services at Bernards. “If schools aren't signing up builders, they're not signing up architects, jobs are delayed.”

In the meantime, education contractors are busy with a backlog of projects spanning multiple years. Fochtman said Bernards is “nowhere near” layoffs since approved projects will take the company through 2022. But, when the number of opportunities decreases, the pressure is on, he said.

AMG's Hancock project is a two-year endeavor, Giacomazzi said, and they are actually hiring more workers for the job.

School's out

With no in-person classes to work around, construction crews have been able to continue

with projects uninterrupted for half a year.

“We'd normally have to cram all of our work in over the summertime and then phase it out during the school year to avoid disrupting students,” added Fochtman. “When students didn't come back we had a seven-month run of empty campuses, and so the jobs that we're doing, we've taken full advantage of that and we've been able to accelerate schedules and take a couple months off the job because of no one being on site.”

Education builds make up 25 percent of Bernards' workload this year, Fochtman said, and represents a significant portion of the company's income. Bernards will build about \$120 million in school contracts. The company currently has 27 active jobs from Oxnard to Palm Springs. One of its priciest is in the Valley, the \$120 million **John H. Francis Polytechnic Institute** in Sylmar.

For AMG, project durations remain unchanged, laid out in documents issued by the college or school district in a bid.

“They've already established those time-frames quite a few months before they even put it out to bid,” explained Giacomazzi.

On the construction sites, contractors face immediate material shortages, ranging from concrete due to wildfires to small pieces of technical equipment that are usually brought in from overseas.

Rolling blackouts and heat in the northern part of the state affected concrete production for Bernards' sources, Fochtman said, since it takes days to get the machines back up and running once a plant has to stop production.

Pre-stacked lumber will last the company six to seven months. Technology so common in the modern classroom, such as electronic white boards, are harder to come by.

“A lot of things might be assembled in the United States, but the parts and pieces come from Asia,” explained Fochtman. “When the lockdown initially happened in March, things got really difficult for a lot of electronics parts and lighting controls and the lights themselves — a lot of the little parts and pieces just weren't available, and still aren't.”

“Technology has really been a major influence in the types of structures that we build,” Giacomazzi said. “This enables Wi-Fi throughout the campus, so they have these wireless access points that any student with a laptop is able to have streaming information at a very high pace.”

He added: “Materials have arrived late due to the pandemic. As lesser items come in, they will be installed.”

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