

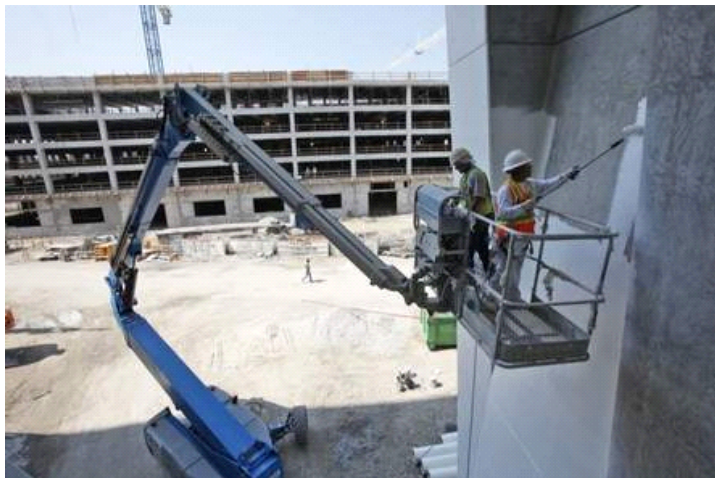
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Tampa Bay's Construction Jobs Hit a New Low

Region next-to-last in country in construction positions lost in past year.



WORKERS PAINT A WALL at the new Florida Marlins baseball stadium in Miami last June. Construction spending is still near its lowest level in more than a decade. (WILFREDO LEE | THE ASSOCIATED PRESS)

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While other parts of Tampa Bay's economy pick up steam, its construction industry just hit a new low.

The Tampa Bay region was second only to Atlanta in the number of construction jobs lost over the past year, according to a trade group analysis released Monday.

The drop of another 4,000 jobs here, or 8 percent of the remaining construction labor pool, is bitter news to an industry already decimated by the biggest housing bust since World War II.

In November, the number of construction workers in the bay area dwindled to 47,300, the fewest in the field in 20 years. During the building boom peak in June of 2006, the region was teeming with nearly 95,000 construction workers.

Facts

THE RANKINGS

Job losses:

1. Atlanta/Marietta: 7,700
2. Tampa Bay: 4,000
2. New York City: 4,000
4. Philadelphia: 3,600
4. Dallas: 3,600

[Source: Associated General Contractors of America]

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"For every two jobs we had in 2006, now there's one," said John Rymer, president of Rymer Strategies, a Tampa real estate advisory and research firm.

"There's a lot of good people ... that have had to be retrained," Rymer said. "They're not sitting there on the sidelines for five years waiting for the economy to come back."

Rymer attributes the latest employment drop to the end of some large commercial projects and phased-out stimulus funding. Residential construction has stopped its freefall and is showing scattered signs of recovery, but Rymer predicts it won't truly start picking up before 2013.

The recent numbers have startled veterans of an industry that used to pride itself as Florida's chief growth engine.

Jeff Thorson, division president of William Ryan Homes in Tampa, thinks residential construction, at least, is bumping around a bottom, unlikely to get much worse.

But shy of any major corporate relocations to the area, "I don't see any dramatic turnaround," he said.

This year, William Ryan is closing on about 100 home sales, and Thorson said the company is budgeting for roughly the same next year. At the height of the boom, it was closing 400 houses a year.

Most builders have cut to the bone already, Thorson said.

"If it gets any worse, there will be more people closing their doors," he said.

If there's any solace, Tampa Bay isn't alone in looking for signs that the worst is over. More than five years after the housing bust, roughly half the metro areas continue to shed jobs.

Construction employment fell in 146 out of 337 metropolitan areas over the past year, increased in 140 and stayed level in 51, according to the analysis by the trade group Associated General Contractors of America. Hardest-hit Atlanta lost 7,700 jobs. (Houston topped the winners list, adding 5,100 construction jobs over the year).

Ken Simonson, the association's chief economist, blamed the situation partly on pledged federal money for highway, transit and infrastructure construction stalled in Congress for years.

"If it wasn't for a slight increase in private sector demand, construction employment would be down in even more communities," he said.

Over the past year, construction employment has been flat nationally, hovering just over 5.5 million jobs.

Contrast that to other segments of the economy that have shown varying degrees of recovery.

The national unemployment rate has fallen to 8.6 percent while Florida's unemployment rate has gradually retracted from a high of 12 percent last December to the current 10.3 percent.

Florida has been adding jobs year over year in hospitality and tourism; health care; professional and business services; trade, transportation and utilities; financial activities; and even manufacturing.

Construction, along with government, is one of the few laggards.

" Our industry has historically led out of recessions in years past," said Thorson of William Ryan Homes. " This one, obviously, is a lot different."

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