

Q&A: Palmisano Contractors' Bill LeCorgne, Jr. talks construction industry challenges locally and nationally

By: Robin Shannon, Managing Editor © January 25, 2016 0

Bill LeCorgne has worked 33 years in the construction and engineering industries and recently joined Palmisano Contractors as a senior vice president of risk management. LeCorgne had previously worked in engineering design at a local design-build firm and later ascended to project management on some of the jobs he engineered. He said the construction management end offered an opportunity for him to get more out of his work. He is also highly involved in the community and is presently serving on the Boards of City Park and Crimestoppers.

What are some of the challenges facing the construction industry heading into 2016?

If you take away the stresses on the global economy (plummeting oil prices), the general lack of skilled labor and craftsmen continues to put a strain on the industry. It leads to general contractors needing to implement better policies for quality control. There is also still a lack of understanding of collaboration between designer and contractor. There needs to be a better effort to implement that in the pre-construction phase. The owners and designers who get this are already ahead of the game and will continue to get more of the work.



On a more local level, are there any specific challenges within the city and surrounding areas that could impact the industry here?

There is one interesting aspect of this that stands out as being exclusive to New Orleans. There are more developers out there stressing the lack of historic buildings in the city ready to renovate. The historic tax credit programs tied to these renovations are a big part of the incentive to take on those projects. That lack of work will come back to bite us. Another issue is the crime problem in the city. I think it could start to impact where developers consider taking on a project. Finally, there are certain projects that include assorted workforce initiatives including local hire and disadvantaged business enterprise requirements. These programs must be run by the required rules and with transparency. The goals must be realistic and able to be achieved in a way that truly helps those smaller contractors. There are certainly some Disadvantaged Business Enterprise (DBE) firms that would not exist if not for those programs and the commitment from larger firms.

Can you give me a sense of where we might see most of the spending on construction?

On the public side, much of the post-Katrina work is concluding, especially when you consider the major rebuild of public schools. Many of the larger out-of-state-firms are starting to move on, which is good for us. Building in the multi-family sector is strong and will remain that way. There are also more condominium projects on the horizon than we have seen since before the 2007 real estate crash. Hotels all across town are upgrading, there are more restaurants opening and upgrading, health care is seeing steady growth and retail is slow, but steady as well.

In your career, do you have a favorite project you have worked on? Is there one that stands out as being more interesting or complex?

I was the lead on a team responsible for rebuilding Tulane after Hurricane Katrina. At the time our materials were limited, cell phone service was sporadic and city services were not as reliable as they normally would be. We all also had our own personal issues that we were dealing with. We had every excuse to fail, but it did not impede what we had to do. We were able to create our own systems and methods on site in a way that just worked perfectly. We managed to renovate or repair 90 campus buildings in 87 days and nights of work. Some buildings had minor repairs, but others were flooded with four to five feet of water. The north side of Freret Street saw the most damage. Tulane had considered splitting the project among four contracting firms, but we ended up being the only one to handle the job.

What are one or two of the more interesting or exciting projects Palmisano is working on?

There are three major developments that really stand out. The first is the new Trader Joe's project in Metairie, which will be the first in the city. It's really an exciting development for the entire community. We are wrapping up work on the new 235-room Ace Hotel on Carondelet Street for The Domain Companies. It is a new brand attracting younger travelers to the city. We are just starting work on a project with HRI Properties to build a 207-room Homewood Suites. This will be the first hotel to bridge the gap between the French Quarter and the Iberville housing site.



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