

Economy Not Slowing Quinnipiac Construction

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Yesterday

Drive the steep, winding road to Quinnipiac University's York Hill campus and spy a rare species not seen in Connecticut very often the past two years:

Construction workers on the job.

Despite a recession that has brought public and private construction projects to a near standstill, Quinnipiac moved right along with its planned \$300 million green creation of a 250-acre student living center atop one of Hamden's highest points.

And there's more work to come.

For a university with tuition of \$34,250 and a steady stream of more than 8,000 students, the recession isn't slowing progress. A few remodeling projects have been shelved, but Quinnipiac advanced with all of its large major capital projects, said Joe Rubertone, associate vice president for facilities administration.

Those projects include the 1,200-bed Crescent residence hall and the 85,000-square-foot Rocky Top student center on York Hill, both opening Aug. 30.

Ahead, the university will further expand York Hill with the 175-bed East View Residence Hall; renovate its Mount Carmel student center; and develop a new medical school in North Haven within four years. Quinnipiac also opened a new admissions office.

Any work at all is sweet music to the



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A new Student Center takes shape on Quinnipiac University's York Campus. It's just one part of a building boom at the Hamden school.



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struggling construction industry, which after many boom years is struggling.

Construction is down across the board, said William Cianci, executive director for the Construction Institute at the University of Hartford. Corporate and manufacturing projects are near zero. With the state's government low on cash, public projects are pushed aside.

Even the old reliable Connecticut Department of Transportation is a letdown, pulling 102 projects that had been slated for 2011.

This bust comes after the state's construction industry built itself up with high-dollar and high-profile projects: the Connecticut Convention Center; UConn 2000's major campus undertaking; the two casinos pouring billions into their facilities; and billion-dollar public school district projects in Hartford and New Haven.

"We went from being in the stratosphere to an absolute collapse, and it will be interesting to see what it builds itself back into," said Don Shubert, president of the Connecticut Construction Industries Association.

The immediate impact is an industry with a lot of bidders for a few projects.

Construction companies are surviving now on the Metropolitan District Commission's \$2 billion overhaul of the regional water system; a few public school construction projects and some clean water projects. Organizations with money to spend — such as hospitals, universities and small companies — are benefiting from an industry desperate for work slashing its prices.

Most of the projects available are small, usually under \$5 million, Shubert said.

But colleges and universities aren't immune from the recession either. When Yale University in New Haven lost 25 percent of its endowment in 2009, two building projects totaling \$350 million in construction costs were shelved indefinitely.

Timing was everything with Quinnipiac's York Hill campus. The plans were presented in 2006, and all the funding and contracts were finalized in 2007 before the recession took hold.

"Had we been a couple of months behind, we might not have been able to do anything up there," Rubertone said. Instead, the university rolls right along with all planned major capital improvements.

O&G Industries in Torrington grabbed the Crescent Residence Hall and Rocky Top student center contract, and FIP Construction in Cheshire scored the East View Residence Hall contract.

This \$300-million York Hill construction grew out of a disagreement and reconciliation between Hamden and Quinnipiac.

When the town asked the university to cease new construction on its Mount Carmel campus, Quinnipiac no longer guaranteed housing for its seniors, forcing them to find accommodations in town. The students living among town residents didn't please local officials either, so Quinnipiac proposed the York Hill expansion to bring those students back on campus. "There was a period of rocky relations between the university and the town," Rubertone said.

With 1,200 beds available at the Crescent Residence Hall at the end of August and another 175 beds at the East View Residence Hall, the university can accommodate its students living needs once again. The seniors get special lease and living options to entice them back on campus.

The York Hill campus incorporates several clean energy features that dovetail with efforts throughout the university to meet students' desire for a smaller carbon footprint, Rubertone said.

The new campus features 28 vertical axis wind turbines and 1,200 photovoltaic solar panels. The two renewable energy sources will produce 370,000 kilowatt hours of electricity each year. The university received an \$850,000 grant for the solar project from the Connecticut Clean Energy Fund, submitting the application the month before the commercial solar program shut down in January because of funding issues.

"Quinnipiac has really embraced green energy," said Christin Cifaldi, project manager for the Connecticut Clean Energy Fund. "Being that they are a high-profile university with students from all over the country and probably the world, it does reflect back on Connecticut as this being a state where clean energy is important to people."

With the further expansion of York Hill, the renovation of the Mount Carmel student center and the establishment of medical school in North Haven, Quinnipiac will continue to supply that rarest of sights: the construction worker on the job.

Beyond those major projects, the university doesn't have any other significant construction projects lined up, save for alterations and improvements to the existing campus structures, Rubertone said.

"That doesn't mean it won't change in the future," Rubertone said.

