

Concrete signs of recovery: Firms see growth in highway projects, commercial renovations

From highway interchange projects to large commercial renovations, the strengthening economy is delivering more and bigger projects to concrete construction companies. That is prompting some concrete companies within BC&E to cautiously predict they will grow in 2014.

White Marsh-based Premier Concrete, Inc. has been landing increasing numbers of jobs and has amassed an ample backlog of work, said Vice President Steve Workmeister.

Premier crews recently completed two massive renovation projects: the conversion of the Rouse Company Building in Columbia into a Whole Foods

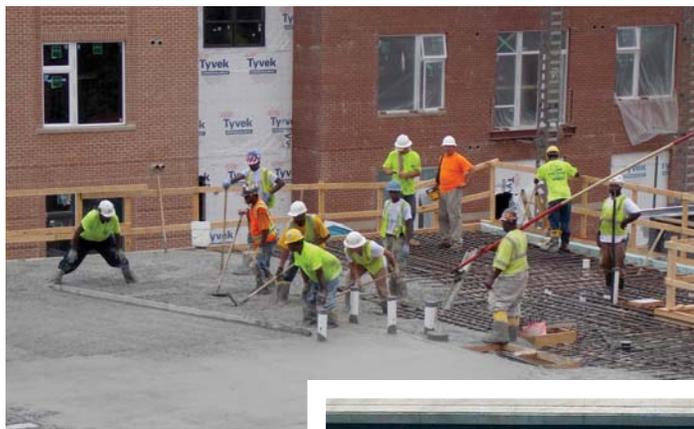


Photo courtesy of Premier Concrete, Inc.

store and fitness center; and the transformation of Gunther Brewery in Baltimore into a 162-apartment complex.

Premier is also involved in the renovation of The Examiner Building on Pratt Street, the expansion of the Maryland School for the Blind, renovations at the Maryland Institute College of Art, and the restoration of the stone house landmark in Druid Hill Park.

"We are seeing a lot more renovation of large commercial buildings, hospitals and colleges rather than new construction projects, but that suits us just fine," Workmeister said. "We like dirty, ugly jobs. We like big, tough renovations that involve intensive labor, hard access, challenging sites and no clear-cut paths on how to complete the job."

In fact, fostering that tough-job specialty helped Premier Concrete weather the recession. Company officials discovered that they faced fewer competitors

bidding for such projects, Workmeister said. Furthermore, once Premier Concrete proved its expertise in difficult jobs, it started to get ample repeat business from several general contractors.

Paul J. Rach, Inc. in Baltimore is also experiencing an uptick in business after weathering a severe downturn during the recession. President Joseph Spencer said work levels dropped by nearly half during the recession and the company shrank to 61 people. Paul J. Rach survived the downturn by expanding into four neighboring states.

"They weren't great markets, but we picked up jobs here and there across five states and that filled in some of the gaps in our workload," Spencer said.

Specialists in highway work, the company performs all types of slipform construction - including barrier walls, curb and gutter, and bridge parapets - and also performs hand work on retaining walls, box culverts,

pervious concrete paving, storm water management vaults and other installations.

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— Steve Workmeister, Vice President of Premier Concrete

Staffed by many workers who have remained with the company for more than 15 years, Paul J. Rach



Photo courtesy of Paul J. Rach, Inc.

continued to land desirable projects throughout the economic downturn, including work on the Inter-County Connector and the erection of barrier walls for the Baltimore Grand Prix.

The recovering economy and Maryland's increased gas tax, however, are finally generating solid growth in work levels at Paul J. Rach. The company is currently working on the new express toll lanes on I-95, the rebuilding of the Route 43 interchange with I-95, the creation of a barrier wall along 495 near Route 50, and the reconstruction of the bridge over

Wilkins Avenue on the Baltimore Beltway. The company also just landed a \$2.5-million job to install Jersey walls in the Hampton Roads area of Virginia.

Both Spencer and Workmeister predict their companies will experience some growth this year if current market trends continue.

"We've had some problems getting some jobs started, but overall the market has definitely gotten better," Workmeister said. "I don't know if I would call it a turn-around, but there seems to be slow, steady growth in the market and now it seems to be picking up momentum." X