

E.V. construction projects hammer away

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Construction continues on the Wild Horse Pass Resort and Casino in the Gila River Indian Community near Chandler. March 24, 2009.

Thomas Boggan, Tribune

Even in a slow economy a few large East Valley construction projects continue to rise.

Among examples are the \$350 million Banner Desert Children's Hospital in Mesa, a \$155 million Commercial Metals Co. steel mill in east Mesa and the \$55 million Campo Verde High School in Gilbert.

Biggest of all, but not readily visible from the outside, is the \$3 billion interior remodeling of Intel Corp.'s Ocotillo chip-making complex in Chandler.

Such projects are helping to carry the construction industry through hard times, and economic development officials say more is on the horizon.

"There has been a slowdown, but we're still seeing projects coming through the zoning process," said Chandler economic development specialist James Smith.

Here are a few of the major jobs that indicate construction hasn't stopped in the East Valley:

Banner Children's Hospital at Banner Desert Medical Center, Mesa - This seven-story expansion is changing the face of the Banner Desert medical complex at Dobson and Southern Avenue in Mesa.

Most of the construction work is expected to be completed this summer, but patients probably will not be admitted until November, said Nancy Neff, spokeswoman for Phoenix-based Banner Health.

"There is still a lot of work that has to be done to get people trained in the new facility," she said.

The project includes a new children's hospital tower with 248 beds, expansion of the pediatric and adult emergency department and expansion of cafeteria operations.

About 700 construction workers are at the site each day, Neff said.

Banner Corporate and Technology Center, Mesa - Another big Banner Health project at Country Club Drive and Brown Road, this one-time Mesa Lutheran Hospital complex is being remodeled into a corporate center that will house Banner financial services, human resources and other administrative offices. Also a new building will contain corporate computer operations.

About 300 to 400 workers are laboring on the project, which is expected to be completed in July.

Indian resorts and casinos, Chandler and Scottsdale - Two huge Indian hotel and casino projects are rising in the East Valley. A new \$200 million, 10-story Wild Horse Pass Hotel and Casino is under construction at Interstate 10 and Wild Horse Pass Boulevard on the Gila River Indian Community. It will contain 242 hotel rooms, more than 1,000 slot machines, 44 blackjack tables and 25 poker tables. The project is scheduled for completion this fall.

Also soaring over the desert landscape is Casino Arizona's Talking Stick Resort off Loop 101 and Indian Bend Road on the Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Community. The \$400 million project is providing about 1,000 construction jobs. When finished early next year it will include 497 rooms, a grand ballroom, 21 meeting rooms, swimming pools, spas, a showroom for live entertainment and a casino with a variety of slot machines and gaming tables.

Commercial Metals Co. steel mill, Mesa - Irving, Texas-based CMC is building a \$155 million state-of-the-art micromill near Phoenix-Mesa Gateway Airport that will convert scrap steel into 280,000 tons of reinforcing bar annually for the construction industry.

The plant near Meridian and Germann roads will use a new type of production process developed by CMC with Danieli, an Italian steel producer.

Project Manager Andy Sarat said construction work is about 65 percent completed, and the mill will open in September. About 425 construction workers are at the site, he said.

General Manager Steve Henderson anticipates an economic recovery will spur demand for the mill's products when production is ready to fire up. "We are committed to completing and operating CMC Arizona," he said.

Intel retooling, Chandler - This massive two-year project was announced in early February, and Intel has started the first phase - decommissioning existing equipment to prepare for installing new tools to make the latest microprocessors.

As part of the remodeling, two existing fabs at the company's Ocotillo and Dobson Road complex will be merged into a single "mega-fab."

The work is expected to be completed in late 2010.

About 1,500 workers will be needed to handle the retrofitting work, and the company expects to be able to recruit many of them locally, said Intel spokeswoman Dawn Jones.

Orbital Sciences Corp. expansion, Chandler - The Virginia-based rocket maker will open an 82,000-square-foot expansion at Price and Dobson roads this summer.

The new building across the street from Orbital's existing manufacturing complex in the Price industrial corridor, is being built by Gilbane Development Corp. and will be occupied by Orbital under a long-term lease. The building will provide office and engineering space for about 300 employees.

Orbital officials said they need the additional space to develop the new Taurus II rocket, which will help to resupply the International Space Station under a contract with NASA.

Campo Verde High School, Gilbert - One of the few large construction jobs in Gilbert, this high school on Germann Road between Val Vista Drive and Lindsay Road is expected to be completed in time for the first day of fall classes on Aug. 10.

In fact, construction work is 1 1/2 months ahead of schedule, said Dave Allison, superintendent of the Gilbert Public Schools.

At the peak of construction six months ago, about 200 workers were on the job, he said. There are still more than 100 doing finishing work, he said.

Regardless of the slowdown in the district's population growth, the project is needed to relieve overcrowding at other Gilbert high schools, Allison said.

HealthSouth rehab hospital, Mesa - This \$20 million project by Birmingham, Ala.-based HealthSouth is going up at the 132-acre Arizona Health and Technology Park near Baseline and Recker roads.

When completed in July, it will contain 40 beds and provide inpatient and outpatient rehabilitation services for those who have suffered fractures, strokes, spinal chord and other injuries.

HealthSouth is going ahead with the project because planners believe there is a shortage of rehab beds in the area, said Richard Schulz, regional vice president of operations.