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SOARING DIMENSIONS 2010

County Operations Complex prepares for next phase

By JON CAMPBELL

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Building nearly a million square feet of office space is hard enough when all you have to contend with is materials and equipment. But what if your job site is also the workplace for several thousand county employees?

Mike Berryhill, project manager for **Roel Construction**, said there was some confusion when the San Diego County government's operational headquarters abruptly became one of the largest construction sites in the area. Employees still had to go to work.

"We'd get people that would just drive right through our dirt, thinking that was the way in ... or we'd get people just walking through," said Berryhill.

The confusion only lasted a week or two, but the challenge of accommodating the county's workforce, even while trying to build them new facilities, remained.

With six four-story office buildings in the plans, plus a conference center, a state of the art medical examiner's office, a new central plant and two parking structures, the work on Hazard Way in Kearny Mesa began in 2008 and will be active through 2013. The goal of the project is to centralize county operations in one area, eliminating the need to lease other office space scattered throughout the city.

The buildings being replaced are more than 40 years old, and LEED goals should make the new facilities cheaper and cleaner to operate. The entire project is expected to achieve LEED Gold certification, and the developers are aiming for a Platinum certification on at least one building, a conference center with a "green" landscaped roof.

The team building the new County Operation Center, as it's known, includes **Lowe Enterprises**, Roel Construction and **RJC Architects**, all based in San Diego. Lowe Enterprises is the developer of the project, managing it in a public-private partnership with the county, while Roel is the general contractor on site.

Dealing with the unique project site has taken some creative thinking, the developer said. Employees found themselves without a parking area after construction started, so a shuttle bus was hired to carry workers from a lot leased from nearby National University. There's even a valet on duty for people on a tight schedule.



Parking is important, and it's certainly one challenge of the still-occupied site, but even more important is ensuring that operations like the Sheriff's emergency 911 service aren't interrupted. The county morgue also needs to remain up and running, so careful planning was required when providing utility service, said Berryhill.

The project was designed in phases so that funding -- most of it in the form of county bond obligations -- could be approved in stages, or denied if necessary. The first phase cost \$175 million, and is expected to be complete in the fall of 2010. That portion of the project included the medical examiner's facility, and two office buildings. The next phase was approved in May, with a combination of cash and bonds totaling \$120 million, and will commence this coming Fall when the first phase wraps up.

Senior Vice President of Lowe Enterprises Mike McNerney said the current state of the construction industry has helped keep project costs down.

"We're coming in 10 to 20 percent below budget. We're just in a very good contracting environment right now because of the economy," said McNerney.

Berryhill at Roel said the tough times and tight margins for subcontractors hadn't caused any problems so far, but his company had made sure to carefully vet the financial health of every company they hired. The costs savings have even allowed for a few upgrades in materials and finishes, and some additional public art pieces.

The complex will include lots of green space, and what James Robbins, principal at RJC Architects called a "campus" feel. The buildings are laid out to provide shade and grassy areas that can be used for lunchtime picnics.

The six office buildings on site are exact replicas of each other, a decision that Robbins said saves time and cost. Problems encountered during construction of one building -- and solutions subsequently invented -- can be applied to the next structure.

Robbins said one of the most remarkable aspects of the project is the commitment to environmentally sound design, especially considering the scale.

"I think it's certainly interesting to be working on such a large project that's so focused on sustainability," said Robbins, noting that the complex is expected to be the largest in California to obtain LEED-Gold certification for all elements.

The "green" techniques, Robbins said, include careful selection of materials to avoid harmful off-gassing, and a design that maximizes the use of light, but may not make office bigwigs happy.

In these structures, the traditional concept of the prestigious "corner office" is turned on its head. Open office floors actually line the perimeter of the building, with glass-walled private offices clustered around the center. The design allows natural light to permeate through to the core of the building, reducing energy needs. Treated glass helps to cut down on heat from solar gain, thereby keeping cooling costs down.

One building that will go even further is the conference center near the middle of the property. A "green" roof will be laid with soil and filled with landscaping. The design reduces water runoff by absorbing rainfall, and also helps absorb sunlight that would otherwise be reflected into the atmosphere. The soil and vegetative matter also provides some insulation, and may be outfitted with sitting areas and gardens as well.

"The project is going extremely well," said Lowe's McNerney. "We have a great team... and we're looking forward to starting the next phase."