

Off The Fringe

ARCHITECTS, BUILDERS HANG ON FOR BETTER DAYS

By Anthony Pioppi, Contributing Editor

Hope Against



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There might be small signs that the economy in general is showing signs of improvement, but not so for most of the golf course design and construction industries.

Other than parts of Asia, the Near East and Far East, business is at best slow and at worst dismal.

Ask Mark Eitelman, owner of Agri-Scape Golf Course Construction how he's doing and his answer can be distilled down to the name of a city: St. Louis.

For the first time in the 19 years of its existence, the Connecticut-based company took a job west of the Mississippi River, renovating Algonquin Country Club, located in St. Louis, to the plans of architect Brian Silva.

Also to survive, the company sold off a few pieces of heavy equipment and took jobs outside the golf industry, such as excavating dirt.

One golf course project on which Agri-Scape is working is outside the company's normal purview. "It's not a golf job, but it's an engineering project," Eitelman says. But in a down economy, it's kind of nice."

Usually, it would be the kind of job Eitelman would let another firm handle. "We're trying to do everything ourselves, if we can," he says. "It's taking up time and getting us further through the storm."

He's holding out hope that 2010 will be a better year. "I don't think it's going to get much worse," Eitelman says.

Doug Carrick, principal of Carrick Design in Ontario, Canada, says he's felt the slight rumblings of improvement in Europe and Asia. He has a project in golf-crazy South Korea and one moving forward in Slovakia. Back home is a different story.

"It's still slow," Carrick says. "We haven't seen signs of a full recovery yet. Some clients are talking about refocusing on projects but haven't pulled the trigger yet."

Like Eitelman, he's looking for a better 2010.

"It's not great yet, but at least we're seeing some signs of it turning around," Carrick says.

According to architect Craig Schreiner, whose Schreiner Golf is based in Myrtle Beach, S.C., the future doesn't bode well and might be even worse than 2009.

"Things are definitely slowing down, even in the remodeling business," he says.

Much of his work has been on courses looking to save money on the maintenance side of the business by removing bunkers or remodeling them so as to reduce washouts.

Like Eitelman, Tom Shapland, president of the Midwest office for Wadsworth Golf Construction, is doing some traveling in search of business. In early December he was out of the country pursuing work, a new tack for the company.

Shapland is not optimistic.

"Our projection is that 2010 is going to be worse," he says. "Private clubs are more reluctant than a year ago to go ahead with projects."

Because it takes so long to get financing and permitting for a golf project, Shapland says he's not surprised the golf construction segment is lagging behind the overall economy.

IMG Golf Course Design's Brit Stenson also says his company's Canadian and U.S. businesses are "stalled" but international business is moving along, especially in Asia where the company has focused its sales efforts since 1991.

"China is keeping us pretty busy, and we have our fingers crossed that the central government doesn't follow through on its threats to slow or stop golf course developments," Stenson says. "Hopefully, the inclusion of golf in the Olympics, making golf a more legitimate sport rather than a leisure activity for the wealthy, will give them pause."

IMG also has a small amount of work in Vietnam and Malaysia. "Except for China, there's still quite a bit of caution in Asia, but maybe not the pessimism that was so apparent last year at this time," Stenson says.

In the United States and Canada, the design and build will continue but it will do so with fewer construction companies and architects. Rumors are circulating of dirt movers already getting out of golf.

On the architecture side, a number of large firms have laid off associate designers and office personnel. The smaller companies, some with only one architect that work in a one geographical area, may fold. ■

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