A Journey of Renewal and Rediscovery

The past and future collide at Western’s Phoenix Charter School Project in Springfield.

With hectic schedules and challenging deadlines to meet, today’s projects are a sprint from start to finish. It’s not often in the fast-paced construction industry that the history of a building can be fully appreciated.

But Western took an unexpected break from its most recent sprint at the site of the old Springfield Armory (and it had nothing to do with winter weather), recognizing that progress should not come at the expense of burying the past.

After it was determined there were archeologically significant items on site, Western Builders, Architect Caolo & Bieniek, STCCAC and their owner project manager, Ar-cadis, and the Phoenix Charter School owner project manager had to closely collaborate to minimize the delays to the overall project and also minimize the costs associated with pushing construction into the winter season.

“While this added an unanticipated degree of difficulty to the project, we could all understand and appreciate why it needed to be done this way,” Chris Boino said.

Among those discoveries were artifacts dating back to the 1800’s, and even though the unexpected finds delayed construction about three months, Boino said it was well worth it.

“This property is a critical piece of our country’s history. You don’t want to go in and trample everything,” added Boino. “While it was certainly frustrating to be delayed, we understood why this was so important. The historical significance needs to be appreciated.”

Construction was completed in late spring, and the school will serve students enrolled in the Phoenix Academy system. The charter school currently operates out of another section of the property, as building 104 has been vacant for several years. The property is owned by Springfield Technical Community College Assistance Corporation, a nonprofit entity. (See Phoenix School, Page 2).

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Employee Profile

Looking Back with Fond Memories

Nancy Fraga first walked through the doors at Western Builders in 1981, but looking back it feels like only a few days have passed. When you enjoy coming to work every day, she’s learned, the years have a mysterious way of flying by.

Fraga has mastered expectations over the years, beginning with Western as a secretary/bookkeeper and eventually ascending to the role of office manager. Over the course of her 34-year career, she’s seen the staff grow from three people to more than twenty employees, among other significant changes she’s experienced at Western.

“When I first came here, I liked the small atmosphere. It was just me, a controller and the president,” Fraga said. “I’ve seen major changes as far as employees coming in. It’s been great to see us expand.”

Fraga has not only seen the company grow over the years, but she’s also witnessed the technological boom that revolutionized offices in the 2000’s. Recalling her early years with Western, memories of challenging and tedious work spring back long before email and laptops and iPhones made the job far easier.

“My tools were an old typewriter with carbon paper. Everything took a lot longer to do, but we didn’t have as much going on back then,” she said. “There were no emails, and contacts were very minimal. Now everything is done by computer.”

While technological advancements have increased the communications responsibilities of the job, they have also decreased many of the challenges. Trips to the post office used to be required of Western employees to mail heavy document packages, but now mostly everything can be sent electronically. For Fraga, she’ll gladly send a few more emails if it means not having to lug around those packages.

As her time at Western draws to a close (she’s planning to retire near the end of 2015), Fraga looks back with mixed emotions. There is excitement about retirement, but she also understands that there will be sadness upon leaving the company she has come to love, especially when her final months get closer.

“I’m not really sure how it’s going to feel, but I still have a buffer of time to acclimate myself,” she said. “It’s a strange feeling. It seems like a lot of years when you look at the numbers, but when you think about it, it feels like just yesterday.”

Though the company has grown substantially and employees have come and gone, Fraga said it has never lost the close-knit “family” feel that has defined it for decades.

“It’s a great atmosphere here,” she added. “We’re not only friends with our co-workers, but it extends over to our families. We are all very happy to see the accomplishments of each other’s children and families.”

Fraga said Western is in good hands once she retires, as she and others have been training Loretta Fograshy to assume her position next year.

In her spare time, Fraga enjoys staying active in her children’s and grandchildren’s lives. With four grandchildren (Ryan, 15; Maya, 12; Bella, 10; and Chase, 7), there is always an activity or a sporting event to attend. Additionally, she plans to spend much of her retirement touring the nation in a camper with her boyfriend, Bill, and their three dogs.

Phoenix School (Cont.)

In spite of the delays, Boino was pleased by a job well done at the site, especially with difficult weather challenges.

“We made great progress through a nasty winter, which is directly attributable to the contractors we have. They did a great job," said Boino, who is excited that Western was leading a project that will help revitalize Springfield.

The project also represented the vast capabilities of repurposing efforts, which have grown increasingly popular over the last decade. Once used to manufacture M1 rifles for WWII soldiers, building 104 will now facilitate the education of students.

“We’re based in Granby, but it’s great to be part of projects that are crucial to the revitalization of other towns and cities," Boino said.

Western is also in the final stages of another major repurposing effort at its Chestnut Park project in Holyoke, which will play an integral role in the renewal of that city’s downtown district. The site used to be owned by the Holyoke Catholic School, but a visionary repurposing effort will transform the buildings into apartments.

It’s nearly the same recipe in Springfield, except this time a school will be the new tenant.

“What makes this project unique is that it’s part of a larger redevelopment plan for Springfield,” Boino said. “This particular project is intended to spearhead development and be an anchor for future projects.”

Inside the Phoenix School Project
Energy Efficient Components

Working with Seattle-based Olson Kundig Architects has allowed Western to get creative with the Smith College Paradise Road housing project.

Each new building will house about sixteen students. Combining the visionary approach of Olson Kundig with Western’s expertise in leadership and management, the project started around Thanksgiving of 2014 and is expected to be completed by the end of 2015.

“These are not traditional dorm buildings that have an institutional feel,” said Western President Christopher Boino. “These buildings have a residential feel, more like apartments than dorms.”

The dorms will feature state-of-the-art energy efficiency components, in addition to other green elements that have emerged in recent years. It always means a lot to Western’s staff to see their projects assist students, and it has been a pleasure for them to work with the Smith College staff.

Always Improving

Western joins forces with new partner, helps bring unique influence to East Coast

Western employees always enjoy working with architecture firms they haven’t encountered in the past, not only to form new relationships but also to introduce themselves to different concepts and styles.

This mentality is clearly reflected at the Smith College Paradise Road housing project where Western is working with Olson Kundig Architects of Seattle, WA to build five dormitory buildings that transcend the archetypes of the past.

“We look at this as a great opportunity. It’s not often you get a chance to work with architects from cities like Seattle,” said Boino, who is excited about the west coast style of architecture the buildings will display. “There are always unique learning opportunities that come when you work with new people.”

Contractors at the jobsite also had a unique, and at times, unpleasant opportunity to work through one of the most challenging winters in recent memory. In spite of the relentless snowstorms, crews managed to build three foundations over the winter.

Boino praised all of the contractors for their determination. Whereas eight full hours of work can be completed on a typical summer or autumn day, crews can only dedicate about half of the workday to construction during the harshest of winter conditions. The rest of the day is dedicated to uncovering the project and then wrapping things back up for protection.

“We have some really fantastic contractors who’ve shown up ready and willing to do what they can to keep the project moving,” added Boino, who said the project stands among one of the most significant of the year for Western. “We hope to really hit our stride in the spring and summer.”

“They are consummate professionals,” Boino said of Smith’s leaders. “The ownership group has been very easy to deal with throughout the project.”

If all goes as planned, the project is slated for completion as early as November, Boino added.
Community Spotlight

*In its latest community outreach effort, Western supports Granby’s schools and recreation*

Western has shown its commitment to the community in a variety of ways over the last few years, most recently with a donation to help improve Granby’s fields at the high school.

The contribution will make a big difference for kids who use the baseball and softball fields. Granby School Committee member Jim Pietras said it means a lot to the school community to receive support from area businesses, especially in an era of tight budgets and difficult financial decisions that often have to be made. In many instances, local school districts simply don’t have the funds to allocate for upgrades to athletic complexes.

“It’s great to get their help, it really makes a big difference,” Pietras said. “This shows that they really care a lot about the kids and the fields they’re playing on.”

For Western, the contribution made to improve the fields aligns perfectly with its vision to not only build new structures, but to also help build strong communities.

“We value community and are thankful for our opportunities to contribute to improving it,” said Western Builders President Christopher Boino. “We encourage others to do the same in their communities.”

Additional maintenance work is expected to be completed at the fields in the coming months.

Contact Us

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