

Construction leaders talk 35 years in the biz, what NM needs to grow

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Klinger Constructors LLC's leaders may not be native New Mexicans but they will tell you that they plan on staying in Albuquerque and they have some thoughts on how we can grow.

CEO of Klinger Tom Novak's career began with Legos and Lincoln Logs. As a kid, Novak began building and designing, a foreshadowing of his 35 years in Albuquerque's construction industry.

"I guess I was destined to go there [into construction]," he said.

And he did end up going there, joining Klinger in 1981. Novak is an Iowa man, having gone to college there for engineering. But he says he loves Albuquerque's climate and its outdoors.

President Ray Smith has a similar story, sketching homes and being fascinated by architecture since he was 8 years old. Smith came to Klinger in 1983. He too hails from Iowa and went to school there but he's fallen for New Mexico, especially the mountains.

The two have been working on projects together for years now. The first was a Presbyterian hospital on Osuna.

"I walk in, right out of college, and look half my age. The superintendent looks me up and down and walks out. He didn't talk to me for the first two weeks," Smith said laughing.

With a combined resume of 70 years of experience in Albuquerque, Smith and Novak say they have seen the industry change and they know the trends. For instance, technology has changed the way construction is done. What was once done by pencil and calculator is now done with computers and cellphones.

"We do jobs in half the time," said Novak.

And they've also noticed the cyclical relationship between the economy and construction. Novak explained as the economy booms, businesses want to build and expand. But as construction booms, the economy's robusticity stays in tact added Smith.

Right now, the two say Albuquerque is on an upswing. Novak is optimistic and says the upswing has the potential to stay.



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Ray Smith is president of Klinger Constructors president and chairman of Albuquerque Economic Development.

"There's room for growth because we haven't grown in so long," Smith said.

Novak says one of the hardest challenges construction is facing is filling job openings. He says Albuquerque's economic downturn lasted long enough for people to leave the state. And while the Duke City is starting to rise up, the workforce is still sparse.

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So what can we do to fix that? Smith says it's all about bringing in more, diverse companies.

"Millennials want choice," Smith said. "Facebook is a huge deal and it may start bringing other companies in."

And Novak says bringing in other companies is a fierce, global competition. One that requires New Mexico being aggressive about showing its assets, according to Novak,

"We can't sit by and let the companies come to you," he said. "You have to go and get them."

It's also crucial to focus on growing the private sector and manufacturing, said Smith.

Novak says at this point the consensus on successful economic development is the necessity of bringing jobs to a certain area. And New Mexico needs diverse jobs that enable growth rather than stagnation, added Smith.

"Part of the problem is not giving opportunities beyond a certain point," Smith said.

In their years of experience, Novak and Smith have received two key pieces of advice: "Enjoy what you do and involve your sense of humor," said Smith. And "Be yourself," said Novak.

While they are veterans of the business, the two say they still enjoy coming into work every day and each project they do is something different.

Albuquerque-based Klinger is a multi-faceted construction company that recently celebrated 35 years of doing business in Albuquerque. It reported \$71.2 million in 2016 gross billings, according to our General Contractors List.

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