

Northern Nevada's construction comeback

By Jason Hildago, Reno Gazette-Journal

Tracy Holland of Sparks built a career that was hewn in steel.

For the last 28 years, the 52-year-old iron worker counted on construction as his signature trade, helping create the bones of projects such as Aces Ballpark and the Mathewson-IGT Knowledge Center at the University of Nevada, Reno.

Holland counts himself as a Northern Nevada resident for an even longer time.

"My family moved here in 1971 when I was 10 years old," Holland said. "I don't want to leave; I mean, why would I?"

Yet leave is exactly what Holland did for three years. From 2010 to 2012, Holland worked at four different projects in the Bay Area to support his family, who remained in Nevada. The driving force behind the decision? A real estate collapse that was quickly followed by a severe recession – the worst in the state's history.

At the close of 2006, the greater Reno-Sparks area boasted 25,900 construction workers, according to the Nevada Department of Employment, Training and Rehabilitation. By the end of 2010, that number fell all the way down to 7,300, a drop of nearly 72 percent.

"We had a lot of members who left when the recession hit," said Holland, who serves as an officer with the Iron Workers Local 118 union. "We also had members who left the construction industry and took other jobs."

In 2013, however, Holland finally returned to his roots and reunited with his family for good.

After four years of decline during the recession, Reno-Sparks saw gains in construction employment in three of the last four years. Driving the momentum is an increase in building activity that included high profile projects such as the Apple data center at Reno Technology Park and the biggest construction prize of them all, Tesla Motors' gigafactory at Tahoe-Reno Industrial Center.

The positive trend is backed by the latest jobs numbers, which saw construction employment in Reno-Sparks grow to 10,300 by the end of last year. Unions, meanwhile, are getting increased interest even from out-of-state members eager to land a spot at projects such as the gigafactory or the recently announced Switch supernap and Ghost Systems projects.

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