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Clark at EpiCentre of complex uptown project

Charlotte Business Journal - by Laura Williams-Tracy

At the site of the old Charlotte Convention Center a project is rising unlike anything in the region. The Ghazi Co.'s ambitious EpiCentre entertainment complex and 210 Tryon, uptown's tallest condo tower, will begin to take shape this spring.

Handling the construction is St. Louis-based Clayco Inc., one of the nation's largest, privately held real estate and construction firms. The company expects revenue to top \$500 million this year.

Clayco is already at work at the 3.2-acre site on an underground parking garage and the four-level, 267,000-square-foot EpiCentre entertainment and retail complex. As Clayco completes that part of the structure, work will begin this fall on the 53-story residential tower, which will rise above the entertainment venue.

Robert Clark, chairman and chief executive officer of Clayco, spoke with the Charlotte Business Journal about the project's challenges and its potential. Here are excerpts from that conversation:

EpiCentre and 210 Trade is a complex project, integrating a 53-story residential tower atop the entertainment and retail component. How does assembling a building with such a wide variety of uses make the construction process more difficult?

Construction in general is complicated. This project has a tremendous number of moving parts. First is the size of it. Then there's the underground portion of it. Whenever you go underground you never know what the conditions will be.

We're coordinating with the rail tracks that pass by the site, so we are working with city agencies. Then there will be heavy traffic in the area, including people walking to your successful arena. We are coordinating the foundation for the hotel and tower. As Afshin (Ghazi) makes deals with tenants, everyone has adaptations with their space.

The size of the team working on the project makes it complicated and requires us to run it like a military project with senior project managers who have the ball and everyone else has to listen to them.

What's going on at the site now?

We are continuing the excavation and shoring. Someone told me we are hauling out 4,000 yards of dirt a day. Soon you will see two cranes go up and one of those will stay for the construction of the residential tower. I always say the most exciting part is when the crane goes up and the second most exciting part is when the crane comes down. You can go to our Web site at www.claycorp.com and see the construction cam.

What can we expect to see at the site this year?

You'll see a tower crane in the near future and hopefully see that crane moving a lot. We'll be building the foundation and lower levels this spring, and I hope you'll see concrete above the street. The concrete work goes fast. We should build the parking garage in eight to nine months. The foundation for the tower will be done in time for the residential tower construction to begin this fall.

The footprint of the project takes up an entire city block, leaving little room for storage and materials delivery. What kinds of steps do you take during the planning phase to coordinate the logistics?

There's a formal logistics plan, and we work closely with subcontractors and suppliers bringing materials to the site. Right now it looks like a big site, but once we come out of the ground it gets complicated. You build parts of the project at a time and relocate your storage and materials as you have to. You build in phases and keep relocating your materials on top of what you just built while you work on the next phase.

What are the biggest challenges you expect to confront during construction?

Unusual weather will probably be the biggest thing we'll combat because everything else can be planned. Materials shortages are something we can plan for, and we think we do an excellent job locking in suppliers way in advance, which we have done with this job.

We also plan for safety. At one time, there will be as many as 300 employees on the site, and we need to know where everyone is and have good visibility.

How many jobs will be created during the construction of this project? What sorts of jobs will you be hiring for locally?

We expect there to be 250 to 300 jobs at the site. These are good-paying construction jobs as laborers, electricians, pipe fitters and carpenters. The job will have every craft.

We operate in 25 cities across the country. We go to the project, not necessarily to a market to stay there. When we are there, we try to be a great neighbor and we try to buy locally and try to work with local contractors when we are there.

Will Clayco perform all of the work on EpiCentre or will you farm it out to others?

I don't know the answer to that. It depends on how the pricing comes out as we buy the job.

Clayco has built office and distribution center projects in the region. What has been your company's experience working in the Charlotte market? Are labor and materials easy to come by?

The Charlotte market is excellent. We have always found the market to be outstanding. There's been great building there and there's a lot of expertise and competency in the market.

What excites you about this project?

I think it's very unique. There are not a lot of projects around the country built like this one -- in an urban setting with this much residential, retail, office, entertainment and a hotel in one project. It's the total package.

It will be a model and people will come from around the country to look at it. It's like a big, complicated watch.

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