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Eric Armstrong, founding principal of Pondera Architecture PC, says business has picked up in the last six months.

Small firms see steady stream

Solo, two-designer offices land more work this year; competition stays strong

By Treva Lind
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Many architects here who operate solo or with only two licensed designers say they're busier with projects this year than they were in 2010, despite widespread competition for the few available jobs.

Some of those architects say they've made adjustments while construction has slowed, such as subleasing space or entering collaborative arrangements with another independent architect for larger projects. Others say that for the first time in about two years, business has increased enough recently that they have either hired help or are considering additional employees or contract labor.

"The past six months is when it really picked up for me," says Eric Armstrong, founding principal of Pondera Architecture PC, at 312 W. First in downtown Spokane. He is working on four projects. "I may even hire someone to do some part-time work. I am getting busy enough that it's getting hard to do it by myself."

He says he doesn't think the uptick this year is from any profound shift, but rather what seems to be more stability in the construction world.

"People are realizing that it's still a great time to build," Armstrong says. "I'm running at discounted rates to be competitive, and I know a lot of contractors are as well just to get the job."

When Armstrong started Pondera in 2008, it was at the height of a bubble for design projects and construction here, he adds, and he rode that wave through 2009.

"2010 is when it slowed down almost to nothing," he adds.

Activity also has picked up significantly this year compared with 2009 and 2010 for Ron LaBar, a licensed architect who operates LABAR architecture inc. at 458 W. 15th on Spokane's South Hill. He's been working on a restaurant design, a Lilac Bloomsday Association building, and several projects at Fairchild Air Force Base.

"I've been extremely busy trying to keep on top of it all," LaBar says. With the increased workload, he says he's hired independent contractors for drafting and illustrations this year on about

half a dozen projects.

"If you take the year as a whole, it was definitely slow at times, but now it's going to be busy from here on out for the remainder of 2011. The beginning quarter of 2012 looks pretty solid as well," he says.

Architect Chris Morlan operates Christopher Morlan Architect PLLC, at 1325 W. First downtown, with one draftsman on staff. The firm did design work for the Wild Sage American Bistro, and more recently for a retail center near the Spokane Valley Mall.

Currently, though, he is handling plans for two medical clinic designs and for a 6,000-square-foot headquarters in Moses Lake for Western Polymer Corp., which manufactures customized specialty starches for the paper industry.

"I seem to get a fair amount of commercial and corporate work, some retail; medical clinics are kind of new," Morlan adds. "This year has been quite a good year. I've been busy enough where I have to have staff again to keep up with the calls."

Denny Christenson, an architect here who operates Denny Christenson & Associates Inc., has recent projects for a children's dental clinic, a church, and the Spokane Valley Cancer Center. He says business dropped significantly in 2008, when he had to trim staff. His office at 9708 N. Nevada, on Spokane's North Side, now consists of himself and one intern architect.

He also reports a recent uptick, although he attributes it at least in part to a seasonal push to get projects in the ground before consistent freezing temperatures hit.

"We've been really busy for the last six months," Christenson says. "I can see it perhaps slowing down a little bit for next year. We have plenty of work to take us through next spring, but there isn't as much in the pipeline as we normally have this time going into the next year."

Christenson says he hasn't had to lower his rates because he kept them steady when building was strong.

Overall, he says, it's still hard to gauge the building climate looking ahead.

"We're feeling from clients that financing is harder to deal with, and the budgets are tighter and the prices and

building costs are still going up," Christenson says. "We explore more options and methods to approach a project."

Christenson says that means offering a client more design options to compare construction costs, such as suggesting different building materials and accents, while watching aesthetics and function.

Some smaller operations here also report a shift in the type of work they're getting, such as seeking more medical office- and institution-design projects rather than multifamily dwellings, which haven't had a construction demand in the past few years.

Morlan recently landed the two medical-clinic design jobs, one in Spokane Valley and another in Pullman, after collaborating with another independent designer, Matthew Collins, who runs Uptic Studios from his South Hill home.

For the medical clinics, Morlan and Collins agreed beforehand what responsibilities they'd handle for that design work, and how they'd split the commission, Morlan says.

"He and I have been marketing and working together not as one business, but sharing our independent skills," he adds. "I've been doing that just this year."

Morlan says the approach allows him to accomplish more while gaining creative feedback from another designer.

"The benefit is it allows both of us to work on slightly larger projects," he says.

Remodeling jobs have accounted for much of the work landed this year by Steven A. Meek Architects, at 41 W. Riverside downtown, which has two licensed architects including Steve Meek, and three intern architects.

The architectural firm's recent work has included a design for renovation of the Holiday Inn Express just north of downtown Spokane, residential remodel requests, and some Washington State University projects.

"Remodeling projects seem to be the bulk of the work out there versus new construction," Meek adds. "The projects we've picked up have been larger projects; we're not working on as many projects as we used to, but they are larger projects, so they're keeping us busy."

Meek says he's hearing that many developers have come to grips with tighter bank financing and are working under those terms to get loans for projects that really need to be built.

"There are projects out there that just had to be done, and that's what we're seeing," Meek says. He adds that the competition for projects remains high. "There are a lot of architectural firms of all sizes that are now competing for a lot of the same projects because there are so few out there."

Larger architectural firms also feel the same pressures.

"Bigger firms are bidding on smaller projects they didn't bid on before," Christenson says. "It's happening to them too. They're finding that there are some national firms coming in and competing."

Armstrong says even basic building designs draw numerous bidders. While he has landed jobs for a Second Harvest building, a fire station, and a physical therapy space, he recently sought to design a 2,000-square-foot utility vehicle garage for Benton County's mosquito control district.

"Benton County said 20 groups submitted," Armstrong says. "We didn't get it."