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Hearty Hammering Builders Flock To State For School, Hospital Jobs

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Andy Coull, president
J.M. Coull Inc.

Lured by a mini-boom in academic and health care construction in Connecticut, several major out-of-state development companies have opened in-state offices in recent months.

The latest entry, Consigli Construction, managers of the \$32 million restoration of the Trinity College Long Walk in Hartford, opened an office in Enfield last month.

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Officials of the Milford, Mass.-based construction manager and general contractor say the new branch reflects their optimism about college and hospital construction opportunities in Connecticut.

"[The opportunities] fit into our business model because they are fairly recession-proof," said Mike Walker, the general manager of the Enfield office for Consigli. "People are always going to get sick, and people are always going to need education."

Institutional projects have been popping up all over New England, and Connecticut is a leader of that trend, construction officials said.

The state recently announced a \$950 million, 10-year initiative for the state university school system after pouring more than \$1 billion into the University of Connecticut campus at Storrs. That does not include the region's private schools, notably Yale University and its 15 major multimillion dollar projects.

"Yale University spent more than \$400 million on renovation and construction projects in fiscal year 2008, and will likely match this pace for the next several years," said Gila Reinstein, a Yale spokeswoman.

In addition, the State Bond Commission recently approved \$323 million for more than 600 local and regional school construction projects, and several hospitals in the state have committed to multimillion-dollar construction projects.

Data from U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics indicates that the construction of institutional buildings and other non-residential projects have offset declines, to a point, in residential construction. Total construction jobs in the state declined by roughly 2 percent for the first half of the year, but the number of jobs specifically for the construction of buildings is up 7 percent.

The state's booming health care sector attracted Boston-based Steffian Bradley Architects, which opened an office in Enfield last summer to complement its existing branches in London and Barcelona.

Roughly 70 percent of Steffian Bradley's business — nearly 100 clients in total — comes from the health care market, specifically long-term care, which made the Hartford region an attractive one. But the academic opportunities were also alluring.

"You go up and down the Connecticut River and there are several hospitals and there is a dense cluster of universities," said Kurt Rockstroh, president and chief executive officer of Steffian Bradley. "For our core markets, this was the place to be."

Rockstroh said the Enfield office could serve future projects in Massachusetts, Vermont and New Hampshire, as well as central Connecticut. "There's more competition in New England because there hasn't been a slowdown like there has in other parts of the country," he added.

The Enfield location is also strategic for Consigli, which is working on two big projects in western Massachusetts: lab renovations at Baystate Medical Center in Springfield and a new building at Chicopee's Westover Air Reserve Base.

For Shawmut, a national construction management firm based in Boston, the draw to New Haven was purely academic, mostly projects connected with Yale.

"There are so many private colleges in the state that it only seemed logical to have a presence and make this our launching pad," said Shawmut CEO Tom Goemaat.

While Shawmut's Connecticut office is strictly focused on academic projects, the potential in the health care field is so strong that Goemaat said it's not if, but when the company adds a medical construction group in New Haven.

Shawmut isn't the only national construction firm eyeing the state. In March, Pavarini Construction, which has headquarters in Stamford and Miami, opened an office in West Hartford. President Jim Hurley noted the "vibrant and growing market ... particularly higher education and health care."

And Maynard, Mass.-based **J.M. Coull Inc.**, another construction management firm, announced two months ago that it plans to open a Connecticut office, but it has not yet named a site.

"We were looking initially at Danbury, but now we're looking more northeast in the state," said **Andy Coull**, the company's president.

J.M. Coull specializes in construction for process companies, such as semi-conductor manufacturers or chemical and biopharmaceutical companies. The goal of the Connecticut office is to attract work either at Yale or through startup companies from the university, Coull said.

"The business environment in Connecticut is favorable," **Coull said**. "We've noticed the influx of other companies, and for us, it makes sense to have a Connecticut address to deal with the credibility and perception issues that come from being out of state."

It's not just institutional projects that are attracting firms. Cubellis, a national architecture and interior design firm, acquired Vinick Associates in Rocky Hill last year in an effort to expand its retail business.

"Connecticut is a great market and there are a tremendous number of opportunities," said Matthew Wittmer, associate principal and architect for Cubellis. "We're in a growth mode, considering the economic situation, because there is pent up demand."

Wittmer said Cubellis has focused on a number of retail rollouts for stores like BCBG and is involved in the Avalon project in Glastonbury.

The incoming firms tended to agree that competition is growing and that having a physical presence in the state is key.
