

# Are we facing a construction workforce shortage? Not really

By **BOB SHIPRACK**

It seems every week those of us in the construction industry are told we face a dire threat in that we will have fewer workers in the future.

Some claim the existing workforce is old and cannot be replaced. Organizations and governments are putting money into "solving" this perceived problem. Sub-standard training programs have taken off, which often do not prepare young people for construction careers. Let's look at the facts vs. the myths.

## Myth #1:

*The construction workforce is old.*

Employment Department data shows construction is the third *youngest* sector of the Oregon workforce. Only 14 percent are age 55 and over. Fifty percent are between 25-44. Any visit to a construction worksite would verify this.

## Myth #2

*There are not enough young people to take their place.*

The State demographer gave me these numbers: Actual decline in 18 year olds ended in 1986, then the number began increasing, hitting 39,000 in 1992, 50,500 in 1998, and 54,000 in 2008. They expect a leveling out or a very modest reduction (4,000) by 2012. Never in recent history have we had so many poten-



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tial workers, and the number is only increased by positive in-migration.

## Myth #3

*I cannot get any workers.*

That depends. The Employment Department just published "Will Oregon Have Enough Workers?" (available by calling 503-947-1204), which details this issue. Throughout the publication it stresses wages, benefits, and training as keys to drawing new workers and concludes "... employers unable to provide competitive employee compensation may face a serious shortage of workers."

The Union apprenticeship programs have had little trouble recruit-

ing people and, in fact, have apprentices and journeymen available on the out-of-work list now.

Having seen the ups and downs of our industry over the years, I am familiar with how we get people involved. It does not help as we enter an economic downturn (recession?) to say we need 35,000 new workers. Employment figures show only a 2.8 percent increase through 2009. Part of the problem is also the rise of "workforce consultants" who convince normally rational people there is a huge problem and get well paid for it — though provide very little.

Building Trades unions are going through a strong period of growth with a big increase in apprentices and with training programs and facilities — funded at millions of dollars per year statewide by unions and their employers, which are among the top in the nation.

We have always known that good pay and benefits, training, and treating people fairly attracts and retains construction workers. The union construction industry has supplied our customers' needs for over 100 years. I think we are well able to continue doing that. Next time you hear someone echoing these myths, show them the facts.

*(Editor's Note: Bob Shiprack is the executive secretary of the Oregon State Building and Construction Trades Council and a member of IBEW Local 48.)*

## Labor-endorsed Bob Main wins Coos County seat

COOS BAY — Labor-backed Robert "Bob" Main defeated incumbent John Griffith in a non-partisan election for Coos County Commission, Position 1.

Main, the county assessor, was endorsed by the Southwest Oregon Central Labor Council, AFL-CIO. He received 10,733 votes to Griffith's 9,384.

He is a former delegate to the labor council and member of AF-SCME Local 2936.

Griffith was chair of the commission and considered a powerful voice on Oregon's South Coast. After completing his term at the end of 2008, Griffith will have served on the three-member commission for eight years.

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