

THE SCHOOL BUILDING GIANT

A profile of TLT: An aggressive, but sometimes troubled builder

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The school building giant.

Well known in this area, TLT Construction Corp. is reputed to be the most ambitious school builder in northeastern Massachusetts.

Although prolific, the the Wakefield-based contractor is often trailed by tales of trouble.

"They are the most aggressive school contractor in the commonwealth," according to Newburyport's Jack Bradshaw, former commissioner of the state's Division of Capital Planning and Operations.

However, TLT's reputation is marred by reports of missed deadlines, unsafe work conditions and air quality problems that have coincided with projects at local schools.

Such problems have landed the contractor in the courtroom.

Last April, the state sued the firm, claiming it botched a job at Suffolk County Courthouse, creating conditions which made court personnel and visitors alike ill.

That case is still pending, according to a spokesperson at the Attorney General's office.

Newbury fire officials also sued TLT last summer after the company failed to correctly install a fire protection system at Newbury Elementary School. Six months later, the case was resolved, and sprinklers at the school now work.

But to firms as large as TLT, the cost of litigating is considered "the cost of doing business. ... Just like you have lights you have to pay for," according to Ken Tarbell, TLT vice president.

Legal expenses, however, are not planned.

"It's not something you'd factor into the bids," Tarbell said.

In some instances, such as school building projects, TLT must work with incomplete architectural plans and school building committees comprised of volunteers, "people who don't understand what it takes to get a job done," he said.

Tarbell said the firm cannot be expected to pay the costs of work that needs to be done which isn't outlined in architectural plans.

"We can't afford to absorb things that aren't in the plans and specifications," Tarbell said. "We don't like those disputes any more than anyone else. But we can't absorb those costs."

Specializing in public projects, Tarbell noted the firm is "always under the spotlight."

"Architects should be held to the same standards as contractors. But they are not," he said.

A company of 100 employees, the firm averages at least 10 multi-million dollar building projects in the state each year, according to Tarbell.

Founded in Winthrop, 21-year-old TLT later moved to Peabody. Outgrowing office space there, the contractor moved to Lynn and then Wakefield.

"We have finally bought a building in Wakefield that can absorb expansion," Tarbell said, during a telephone interview last week.

Locally, TLT's work has included building projects at the Pine Grove School in Rowley, Newbury Elementary School, several projects in Georgetown and Salem, according to information provided by TLT and recent newspaper clippings.

In Gloucester, the firm is also doing \$28 million worth of renovations at the city's high school. And in Methuen, TLT is renovating and putting an addition on the Marsh School, a task which carried a \$15 million price tag.

In late January, TLT was awarded a \$26 million building project at Brookline High School.

The firm also manages to step beyond the school building arena.

In 1994 and 1995, TLT was awarded over \$18 million worth of work at Taunton State Hospital, according to DCPO records. In January 1996, TLT also landed a \$10 million expansion project at Roxbury District Court which involved an 8,000-square-foot addition onto the front of an existing court house there.

There's also TLT's work at the Suffolk County Courthouse.

In Newbury, officials were frustrated when TLT missed a major deadline — promising to finish a \$14 million renovation and addition project by late December last year.

While nearing the finish line, the project has yet to be completed.

In Gloucester and Georgetown, TLT's presence has coincided with air quality problems. Problems in Gloucester led to an evacuation at one point. A Georgetown student discovered a bag of asbestos, a hazardous substance, draped over a locker last year.

And one year ago, the federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration fined TLT \$114,800, in part for failing to protect scaffolding erected at Salem State College the previous summer.

A construction worker suffered a broken leg after falling from the staging in August 1995. An 18-year-old Salem man later committed suicide by jumping from the top of the scaffolding.

TLT has made headlines. But Tarbell stressed that doesn't always mean the problems were the firm's fault.

"It's important you understand the contractor should be heard as well," he said.