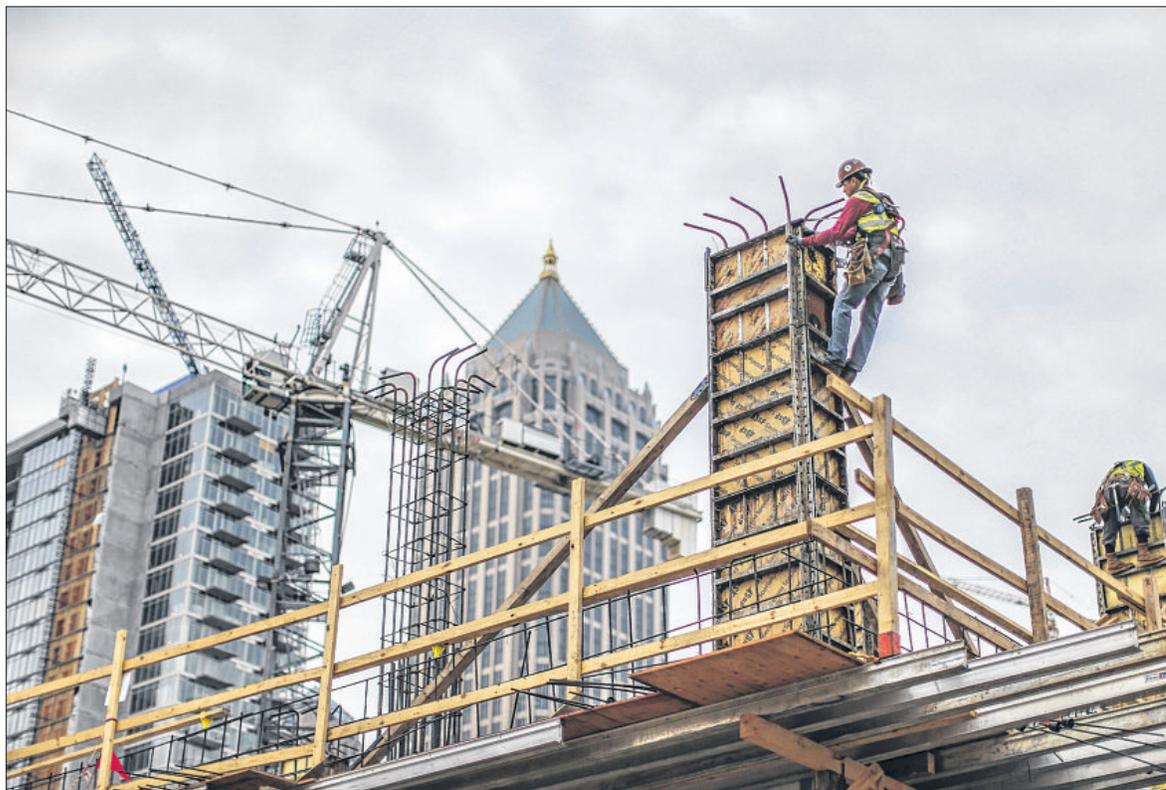


CONSTRUCTION



Workers with New South Construction work on Spectrum, a five-story apartment building with ground level retail in the 1200 block of Spring Street in Atlanta. Strong economic growth and a shallow pool of workers have put construction companies under strain. A recent survey shows 87 percent of firms say finding skilled workers is their top problem. JOHN SPINK / JSPINK@AJC.COM

Georgia construction firms are feeling labor squeeze

Strong economy, shrinking workforce strain state firms.

By Michael E. Kanell
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Strong economic growth and a shallow pool of workers have combined to stress construction companies, according to a survey of Georgia firms.

It's not just front-line laborers in short supply, but managerial recruits as well, according to the survey by accounting firm Bennett Thrasher and the construction management department at Kennesaw State University.

"They just don't seem to be replacing people as fast as those people are retiring," said Tom Jollay, a co-leader in the construction practice of Bennett Thrasher.

The survey showed 87 percent of firms say finding skilled workers is their top problem. The shortage includes entry-level, lower-skilled laborers, specialized workers like pipefitters and brick masons, and project managers and superintendents, Jollay said.

There are now 180,000 construction workers across the state, most of them in metro Atlanta, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Construction was one of the crucial sectors that in the pre-recession economic boom that, starting in 2007, crashed along with the housing market. Many of the jobs - especially skilled trade positions like electricians and welders - did not require college degrees but still paid better-than-average wages.

Construction employment peaked at more than 224,000

before the recession, then fell below 141,000 by early 2012 before rebounding, Bureau of Labor Statistics figures show.

Jollay said there now are 2,368 construction companies in Georgia, ranging from "pretty big firms down to one- or two-men outfits that work out of a pickup truck." Roughly three of four are based in metro Atlanta. More than six in 10 firms said they expect to add employees this year.

As long as the economy grows, construction is likely to move in the same direction, Jollay said. "The backlog of orders is enough to get them through the year to 2018."

But a lack of workers could prevent some firms from committing to work, cooling growth the way a lack of capital chills business expansion.