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Dollars Doing Double Duty in Tennessee

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On a hillside overlooking the University of Tennessee Medical Center in Knoxville, IBEW electricians are hard at work. But in the region dominated by large-scale industrial and utility work for the TVA, this time they're building something a little different.

The project, called Knox Ridge, is an 84-unit student housing complex being built to serve some of the university's 30,000 young people, and for most of the roughly two dozen members of Knoxville Local 760 working there, it's the first Romex (non-metallic) wiring job they've done.

"Knox Ridge is the first full-fledged residential wiring job that I can remember us doing in 25 years," said Local 760 Assistant Business Manager J.R. Cummings. "When the contractor put out the call for journeyman wiremen to come and do Romex, people were shocked. Nobody around the hall had ever seen a project like this come along."

The story of how Knox Ridge ended up using Local 760 electricians, however, is a success story that's been repeated over and over in East Tennessee, according to International Representative David Hoque.

"Like a handful of other projects in this region, we were able to use investments through one of the local pension funds to put our people to work," Hogue said. The Southern Electrical Retirement Fund, based in nearby Chattanooga, like nearly every pension fund, devotes a portion of its investments to real estate."

"The beauty of investing in these kinds of projects," Hoque said, "is that we're able to create jobs for our members while the pension fund is making the sort of solid property investments it would be making anyway."

In the case of Knox Ridge, a relatively small \$4.9 million investment is projected to result in more than 21,000 man-hours of work Local 760 would have otherwise not gotten. That adds up to nearly a half a million dollars in projected wages for IBEW members before the expected investment returns are even factored in.

"That kind of dual benefit is a no-brainer," said Hoque. "We're adding work for our active members and using our pension assets to build value for current and future retirees."

Helping the Southern Electrical Retirement Fund make these decisions is a former IBEW apprentice turned investment advisor, Michael Stratos. Stratos, who manages labor-related investments for Electrical Capital Advisors, LLC, is the son of a Washington, D.C., Local 26 journeyman who says his own apprenticeship got him through college.

"The niche we saw, particularly in the South," Stratos said, "was helping grow the market share in areas where it needed a boost. Using pension money to invest in projects like these leads directly to work for IBEW members, but it also educates general contractors and developers about the quality and craftsmanship that comes along with highly-trained union labor."

For Brian Garrett, the project manager for Knox Ridge general contractor Value Added Concepts, working with the IBEW has been eye-opening. "This is the first time we've used a union contractor," he said, "and they've done a wonderful job. This whole project has been a really positive experience for everyone so far, and we're staying ahead of the game and on track to deliver by August."

Leading the charge from the IBEW side is Rob Draper, a journeyman wireman serving as the project foreman for signatory contractor Canterbury Electric. Before coming to Knox Ridge, Draper topped out working with Canterbury on a downtown Knoxville apartment complex called Marble Alley Lofts.

Like Knox Ridge, Marble Alley was a SERF investment that resulted in another half million dollars in IBEW wages and benefits. But as a downtown development, it used more familiar metal-clad wiring. "That project was great preparation for this one," Draper said. "But this entire thing has been a learning experience. It wasn't a huge leap given our training, but it's been rewarding to be working in a market we haven't been in before and learning new skills on the job."

Jerry Hembree, a seven-year member of Local 760, felt the same about his three months and counting at Knox Ridge. "We know the general contractor wasn't really excited about using union electricians on this job," he said. "But we hope we've changed his mind. Whatever their general expectations were of us before we got here, I can guarantee we've impressed them. The feedback has all been incredibly positive."

Local 760 Business Manager Tim Tate is thrilled by the recent SERF investments that have put his members to work. "It's an exciting time for our local," he said. "These investments have opened up new markets to us and our usual work is picking up too. We've got contractors bidding two or three more residential jobs as we speak, and the local developers are taking notice of the great work we're doing."

As evidence of the growth, the local's new training center just started a second apprenticeship class for the first time ever, with many of the spots filled by construction wireman/construction electrician classifications who have been critical to making the residential bids competitive.

“Knox Ridge and Marble Alley were just the beginning,” said Hoque, who works in Business Development. “This kind of partnership, whether it’s here in the South or anywhere else we have members out of work, is a great way to expose developers and general contractors to the quality of our work and the value that highly-trained IBEW electricians provide.”

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