



COURTESY ERHARDT CONSTRUCTION

Managing Erhardt construction are, from left, Larry Erhardt, Jr., vice president; Joe Erhardt, president; and Larry Erhardt Sr., founder and chairman. They are standing in the Van Andel arena.

Erhardt Construction Takes On Grand Center Expansion

Four-Year Project Is Getting Underway As You Read This

By Anne Bond Emrich

GRAND RAPIDS — Erhardt Construction is linked to some of downtown's most dominant buildings, including the Van Andel Institute, the Van Andel Arena and the Amway Grand Plaza Hotel tower.

Expect to hear the Erhardt name more often over the next four years as the company undertakes construction of the \$200 million convention center project downtown (see story, page B12).

The Ada-based general contracting and construction management firm has been operating locally since 1962 when founder and chairman Larry Erhardt Sr. started the company with a workforce of one — himself.

The senior Erhardt was later joined by two sons, Larry Erhardt Jr., now vice president of the company, and Joe Erhardt, the company's president since 1989. Over the years, Larry Sr. and sons have grown the business to include some 70 employees and roughly \$40 million a year in average construction volume.

Today the company handles a variety of civil engineering projects, including commercial and industrial buildings, municipal and parking facilities, educational and healthcare building projects, church construction, as well as water treatment, wastewater treatment and hydroelectric facilities.

"The service we primarily sell is being involved early on a project and working
See Erhardt, page B20

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*— Joe Erhardt,
president, Erhardt
Construction.*

Erhardt

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with the owner and architect all the way through the design and construction," Joe Erhardt said.

"Our goal is always to do segmented budgeting during construction. We generally do two or three stages of budgeting to help the client and architect understand what they can afford, so when they're done with their design, they'll be within their budget.

"Whether it's a \$3 million church or a \$200 million convention center, they can't afford, at the point that the construction documents are all done, to go back and redesign it all if it doesn't meet the budget."

The downtown convention center project is a joint venture with Indianapolis-based Hunt Construction Group.

The Erhardt-Hunt team has been involved in pre-construction activities for the past year. The Arena and Convention Center Authority awarded Erhardt-Hunt the construction contract last month, and preliminary work on DeVos Hall got underway last week.

The convention center will be built out in phases over a four-year period and is slated to open in December of 2004. In mid-March the construction team will begin renovation of the DeVos Hall performing arts center.

After relocation of the Hall of Justice and the police department this fall and demolition of the old courthouse, police administration building and parking ramp, work on the north end of the Grand Gallery and the 165,000-square-foot convention facility will begin.

Following that will come the renovation of the Grand Center, then renovation of the Welch Auditorium.

The convention center will have "all the bells and wires" technologically speaking, and it is the largest project Erhardt Construction has tackled thus far, Erhardt noted.

Hunt Construction brings to the mix key people experienced in convention centers. Erhardt Construction has teamed with national firms more than once on large projects, including the Van Andel Arena.

"One of the reasons we get into joint ventures is that we think we have something to offer locally," Erhardt explained.

"Usually, the local firm provides the superintendents and the tradesmen. We know most of the people in town so the client can deal with us after the job is done and the out-of-town firm goes away. It's a good fit. It would be tough for them to come in here and do it without us and we couldn't do it without them."

The Van Andel Institute was among the most highly technical building projects the company has worked on to date. It had a unique design as well. Erhardt says it was a challenge because it was built into the side of the hill on a small lot, so it was like building on a postage stamp.

The Van Andel Arena had its own set of challenges, as did the company's renovation of the 33-story Plaza Towers, formerly Eastbank Towers, which required complete removal and replacement of the building's exterior façade and extensive improvements to mechanical systems.

Most of Erhardt Construction's clients are located within an hour's drive of Grand Rapids, which allows for more control over a project and a shorter commute for employees and subcontractors

working at project sites, Erhardt noted.

Although a trio of Erhardts manage the firm, Erhardt is quick to point out that it's not just about family.

He gives the company's employees credit for the company's continuing success.

More than half of Erhardt Construction's employees have been with the firm 20 years or more and they're among those who help the company achieve its goal of "excellence in service."

"We believe we provide more service than any of our competition does from the standpoint of our people in the field and in the office," he said.

"I think we have a solid name and reputation for doing what we say we will do."

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Construction is one industry where experience counts a lot, Erhardt observed, and his father's 45 years of experience is a great asset to draw upon because "you can't afford to learn everything the hard way."

In the 20 years Joe Erhardt has been involved in the business, the biggest change he's seen in the industry has been its pace.

Everybody wants things completed faster, he said, and there's no such thing as closing a job down for a couple of months during the winter anymore.

Slow, controlled growth is Erhardt Construction's favored growth pattern.

"We don't target a huge volume of work. We try to get an appropriate amount and do it well," Erhardt remarked. "We like to have a mix of projects. It's tough to do all large ones or all small ones. Right now we've got four projects we'll be starting up this spring that range from \$3 million to \$6 million each."

Erhardt says the construction industry is in good health, having enjoyed five to six years of nonstop activity.

There's a lot of opportunity in the area, Erhardt added. He expects the millions of dollars in school bonds passed last fall will impact the West Michigan market this year and take up a lot of the local subcontractor capacity.

"There's a very strong group of subcontractors in the Grand Rapids area. There's a good work ethic, and people deal fairly with each other," Erhardt said. "It would be tough to leave here and go to Detroit or out east somewhere where that's not necessarily the case." **BJ**