

Rise of the cranes

Giant machines key to changing skyline

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Cranes are the pumping heart of a high-rise construction site, speeding up the work by creating easy access to higher floors.

And they've temporarily transformed the skyline of downtown Fort Myers as condominiums spring up that need their services.

But at \$22,000 a month and up, they're expensive and in short supply in Florida's super-heated construction market.

Don Paight, executive director of the Fort Myers Redevelopment Agency, said they're a welcome sight as they sprout up around town: two at High Point condominium on West First Street; one at the Lee County Courthouse expansion project; and one each at Riviera and St. Tropez condominiums on Palm Beach Boulevard just east of Billy Creek.

"They're a physical manifestation of the work that's being done," Paight said. "You can look at an empty lot and say maybe something will be done and maybe not, but with a crane you can really see it."

The big cranes have long been a common sight along the coast, where beachfront condos line the shore in Naples, Bonita Springs and Fort Myers Beach.

But now two cranes are on the site of the North Star condos being built on Beau Drive in North Fort Myers, and another two at the Tarpon Point community in southwest Cape Coral where the three 14-story Tarpon Landings towers are under construction.

Russ Cameratta, who's supervising the construction of the two 32-story towers that will be Cameratta Properties' High Point condo, said the crane is an expensive but vital part of his job site.

"Believe it or not, this crane is the most valuable thing on the job," he said. "It keeps everybody working. Everything in the building comes in from the crane."

That means that the crane's time has to be scheduled out in painstaking detail so each subcontractor is able to use it on time — hauling up concrete block, doors, drywall, steel and all the other components of the huge building, Cameratta said.

Sometimes, he said, the crane operator has to work for hours the night before so the crews have what they need the next day.

Steve Cona, president of the Florida Gulf Coast chapter of the Associated Builders and Contractors, said these days cranes have to be scheduled well in advance by a builder.

"Because of the amount of construction work up and down the west coast and the whole state of Florida, your crane rentals and operators are definitely getting tight schedules," said Cona, whose group represents the builders of large construction structures.

Generally, he said, anything taller than five stories requires a permanent crane such as the one at High Point. Smaller projects make do with mobile cranes brought in when they're needed.

Cameratta said the big permanent cranes are "basically self-building," assembled from component parts trucked in from the last job.

The crane is bolted to the side of the building and if a hurricane were to come, the boom would be allowed to rotate in the wind so it wouldn't break, he said.

Tall structures could be built without cranes, but they'd be prohibitively expensive and would take years longer to complete, Cameratta said.

If a construction project is to be done on time and under budget, he said, there's no margin for error in keeping the crane working. "Every step of the way is analyzed. It has to run like a machine. It's a lot of money for everyone if it doesn't."