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Construction workers building Intel's new Ohio factories could make \$100,000 a year



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The 3,000 workers who Intel says will be hired to run the two plants the semiconductor company will build in New Albany won't be the only ones to collect a handsome salary for their work.

So will the projected 7,000 construction workers who figure to collect average salaries topping \$100,000 a year, say union officials involved in the project. By comparison, Intel says the average wage for its workers at the plant will be \$135,000 a year.

"They are wanting to get this done and they're willing to pay for it," said Mike Knisley, secretary-treasurer of the Ohio State Building and Construction Trades Council.

"It's bigger than anything I've ever seen."

Intel is paying to construct Ohio's biggest ever development project

The council is comprised of 137 trade unions in Ohio that represent about 100,000 construction workers. It is working with the Columbus Building Construction Trades Council to provide what both groups say will be the specialized workforce needed to build and maintain Intel's manufacturing operations here.

Intel has yet to announce what contractor will handle the \$20 billion project, the biggest economic development project in state history. It has said construction should start this fall with a goal of opening the plants in 2025.

Intel has said the site has the potential to include eight plants, called fabs, with a total investment approaching \$100 billion through the rest of the decade. That would make it one of the largest semiconductor sites in the world.

Following Intel will be suppliers building plants at the Intel site or near by, meaning that construction work could continue for years.

"We're trying to get ahead of this thing as much as we can. It's moving fast. I'm very confident we're going to be successful and leave Intel with a good taste three or four years from now," said Knisley, who is pushing for the entire construction workforce on the site to be union.

"We are fully engaged with Intel to make this a successful project."

Some Intel construction workers may earn as much as \$150,000

The project may need as many as 2,500 pipefitters, 1,700 electricians and 800 sheet metal workers, he said. Workers likely are looking at 10-hour days, five or six days a week, he said.

Counting wages, overtime and benefits, most union workers will pull in at least \$100,000 a year, he said. Some may collect as much as \$150,000.

Beyond good wages, Knisley and Dorsey Hager, executive treasurer of the Columbus Building Trades Council, said they expect Intel to treat construction workers well — providing places where workers can park their vehicles, transportation to and from the construction site, lunch in a warm setting, access to the job site without walking through mud, and decent places where workers can wash up.

Knisley said his takeaway from previous projects Intel has been involved in is that the company puts an emphasis on worker safety.

Knisley acknowledges that there aren't enough local union workers to handle this project and the other major construction projects going on currently in Greater Columbus.

Finding the workers and getting them trained for the construction site are equally important, Hager said.

"It's a great problem to have," Hager said. "I'd rather be looking for 9,000 workers than 9,000 jobs."

The big need for workers means the project will draw local workers, workers who live within an hour or two of the site, and other workers from throughout the country who travel to different jobs, Knisley said. That latter group will live in hotels, recreational vehicles or rent rooms in the area.

"I feel very confident that we'll be able to man this work," he said.

The construction unions have a long history of involvement in major projects, whether it's Honda's Ohio operations, nuclear power plants, Shell's petrochemical complex it is building in western Pennsylvania or refinery projects in Ohio. Locally, the unions have built data centers and are handling the \$1.79 billion expansion of the Ohio State University's Wexner Medical Center.

Jim Lenner, a former Johnstown city manager who has formed a consulting company called Neighborhood Strategies, believes many construction workers who come here to work on the Intel project will end up staying. The same thing happened in Chandler, Arizona, outside Phoenix, after Intel established a presence in 1980.

"Those 7,000 temporary workers aren't going to be temporary," he said.

In Chandler, workers built Intel's plants, then were needed to build plants for Intel suppliers. By the time that was done, Intel needed renovations to its operations, he said.

"The more conversations that I've had, eight fabs is not that far away," he said. "Just the way the world is operating, the need for the fabs will push this sooner rather than later."

Hager and Knisley know the trades need a new generation of workers if they are going to meet future demand, and that includes the Intel project. They also know the unions need to do a much better job of bringing more women and minorities into a field dominated by white men.

The building trades have launched the Building Futures Program in partnership with Franklin County and the Columbus Urban League targeted at people who have experienced barriers to employment or education. The 12-week program teaches students life skills and basics in construction that prepare them for apprenticeships.

Intel has indicated a willingness to help grow such programs to move the project along more quickly, Knisley said.

"There isn't the available workforce right now. ... We're going to answer the challenge," Hager said.

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