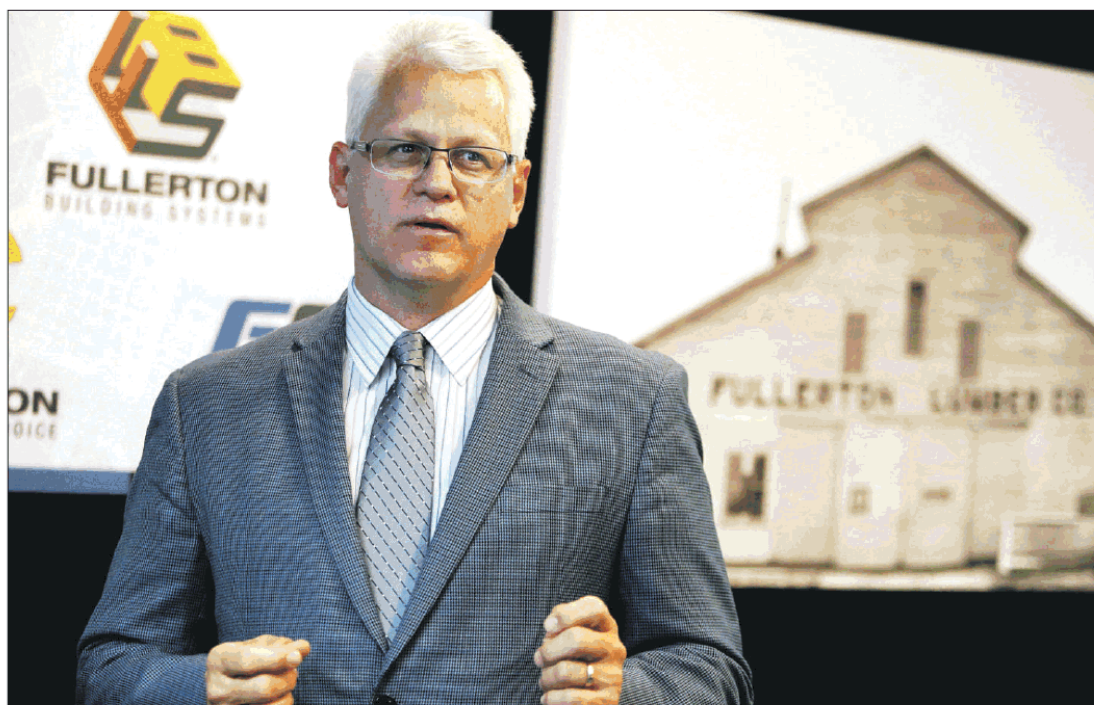


bricks & mortar

TWIN CITIES DEVELOPMENT



DAVID IOLES • djoles@startribune.com

Fullerton Companies Chief Executive Dave Walock said demand for the company's product has blossomed into steadily growing revenue.

Ready to open on the quick

Advances in a construction technique help some businesses get ready to serve customers in a faster fashion.

By DON JACOBSON
Special to the Star Tribune

Residents of St. Michael probably could have been forgiven if they were taken aback by the appearance of a new Dunn Brothers Coffee shop seemingly overnight in the town this summer.

After all, in just a matter of one day, what had been a vacant downtown lot had sprouted a fully realized, 2,600-square-foot commercial building shell.

That was in early July, and by Oct. 5, Dunn Brothers franchisee and St. Michael native Matt Kammann was ringing up sales of lattes thanks to major advances in prefabricated construction techniques that are being more widely adopted in the "quick-serve" restaurant and other small-retail segments.

Kammann said he completely understands the "wow factor" of such a sizable new commercial building popping up so quickly compared to traditional "stick-frame" construction: He himself was somewhat flabbergasted by the speed of the "panelized" construction method used for the project, a system developed by Plymouth-based Fullerton Companies.

"It really was amazing," he said. "Fullerton was able to put the building shell up in literally one day. People went by on their way to work in the morning and there was just a concrete pad. They came home and the

entire exterior shell was up, complete with all the brick and stucco veneer."

Kammann said he and his general contractor, R.J. Marco Construction of Little Canada, decided to utilize the Fullerton prefabricated wall panel system for the same reason many other quick-serve companies and franchisees are — reduced construction time, meaning new stand-alone locations can start generating revenue months earlier than they could have otherwise.

While it's a bit more expensive than traditional stick-frame construction, the use of prefabricated wall panels is nonetheless becoming the norm in situations where quick-serve retailers don't want to deal with possible delays due to labor shortages, inclement weather or a host of other factors that can disrupt construction schedules.

As such, it's becoming an increasingly popular option for quick-serve outlets being built directly by corporations, whose production schedules tend to be especially tight, said Dave Walock, president and CEO of Fullerton Companies and its Fullerton Building Systems subsidiary.

"If your schedule is, 'I close on a piece of land, and 90 days later I need to be generating revenue there,' then you almost have no other choice than to go the panelized construction route," he said. "The main obstacle to meeting these deadlines are labor shortages. That's a real problem in many areas of the country, and we're able to take that out of the equation."

Walock, in his fifth year as CEO of the family-owned Fullerton Companies, has seen demand for the company's product

blossom into steadily growing revenue, which this year is in the "\$50 million range."

He says his company can offer not only prefabricated sections of wall panels, which are becoming increasingly common in all types of commercial building construction, but also the masonry veneers attached to them, installed in a controlled indoor factory environment in Worthington, Minn., and delivered via truck to building sites.

Thus, the sometimes-lengthy delays builders must endure to tap the ever-dwindling supply of skilled masons is eliminated from the process.

"Brick masonry and some of the other skilled building trades are really being challenged now," he said. "Not many young people coming out of high school are saying 'I want to be a mason' anymore. Our product has a thin brick veneer installed in the factory, so we're taking a step out of the process."

Fullerton's growing list of quick-serve restaurant and convenience retailing clients reads like a who's who of the industry. They include dozens of corporate- and franchisee-owned McDonald's, major local Taco Bell franchiser Border Foods, Starbucks Corp., Holiday Stationstores and grocer Hy-Vee Inc., which has used Fullerton to erect combination convenience store/coffee shops in the parking lots of its new Twin Cities metro locations.

Don Jacobson is a freelance writer in St. Paul. He is a former editor of the Minneapolis/St. Paul Real Estate Journal.