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On budget, on time and as part of a team

That's how Stephen Ballard likes to deliver his construction projects

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A common sight in Hampton Roads is a construction venue wearing the black and red block logo of S.B. Ballard Construction.

The man behind the logo is Stephen Ballard, company president, who prides himself on staying in budget and delivering projects on time.

Many of Ballard's projects are schools in Norfolk, Virginia Beach and Suffolk as well as Wise County in the southwestern corner of the state. This could be considered an irony since Ballard admits to being "not the smartest student" while at Norfolk's Maury High School.

He is set to build four elementary schools in his hometown of Norfolk, replacing Campostella, Broad Creek, Ocean View and Larchmont elementary schools.

Ballard is the general contractor for the new Kellam High School in Virginia Beach and has complet-

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Stephen Ballard is set to build four elementary schools in his hometown of Norfolk.

PROFILE

STEPHEN BALLARD

Builder balances wants with needs

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ed new buildings or renovations at Thalia, I. Inkborn and Bayside elementary schools in Virginia Beach and Suffolk's Kings Fork High School.

He lists construction details from memory.

What excites him about building schools is the Public-Private Education Facilities and Infrastructure Act (PPEA), which differs from the way municipalities previously developed new buildings.

The old way was to have an architect design a building first, then send out a request for proposals to contractors who'd bid on the project. Typically the lowest bidder received the contract.

"I don't like the design, bid, build way because school systems are stuck with the lowest bidder and that is not always the best guy," Ballard said.

"In this economy many are bidding way low just to stay afloat and they are bringing on subcontractors who can't complete the job. It can become a problem to the point they have to go to court."

With the PPEA system, the builder works with the architect and the end-user hand in hand. It allows for more flexibility, Ballard said.

"It is a far better team concept," he added.

Ballard is working with Hampton Roads contractors including RRAM Architects, Litvas Group Architects, Morgan Keegan and Co. along with Kaufman and Canoles Consulting and Attorneys at Law.

Ballard cited examples of teamwork and compromise, including a high school under construction in Wise County, where more classrooms were needed than originally thought. Ballard said he proposed to officials to downgrade from a terracotta to a vinyl floor in exchange for 14 additional classrooms.

"What is better for a child — a terracotta floor or a classroom?" he said.

Another example in Wise County included two schools, both of which were set to get expensive ceilings. One school uses the auditorium about seven times a year while the other school's auditorium is used about 60 times a year for school activities, council meetings and church group meetings. To save money for the school system, Ballard suggested the school with the more active auditorium should receive the expensive ceiling.

He learned the concept of replacing wants with needs while he was in Florida, watching television. He said a Florida builder, whose name he doesn't remember, was profited on a local show. A Florida school wanted an expensive accent wall to



Ballard is the general contractor for the new Kellam High School in Virginia Beach, one of many school projects he's done.

Ballard Construction around Hampton Roads

- Erosion and hurricane protection seawall in Virginia Beach
- Foreman Field Football Complex and parking garage at Old Dominion University
- Norfolk International Airport parking garage
- St. Mary's Home for Disabled Children in Norfolk
- Norfolk State University Spartan Suites
- University Village at Old Dominion University
- Distributed ground station at Langley Air Force Base
- Operation Support Center at Langley Air Force Base
- Powhatan Sports Complex in Norfolk
- Half Moore Cruise and Celebration Center in Norfolk
- Joint Deployment Center, NH-95 at Norfolk Naval Base

go along with the rest of the city's décor. But the school lacked the funds for an information technology center. The builder proposed a smaller version of the décor to save money to build the center.

"With the old method of design, bid, build, you can't tweak the design according to what is important to that school," he said.

While designing Campostella Elementary in Norfolk, Ballard learned that of the school's nearly 700 students, 640 walk to school. The original design included a large bus loop but Ballard felt it was not needed so he proposed moving it and making it smaller.

"They only have three buses a day and where it was would have made it hard for those who walk to school," he said.

"It's a matter of working with the owners," Ballard said.

The owners don't just include administrators and school board members. Ballard likes to hear from those who handle day-to-day activities and classes, especially security personnel.

"They are important because they know what it takes to keep the kids safe," he said.

Ballard said he learned much about what schools need in one day by being a visiting principal at Campostella a few years ago.

Tony Arnold, director of facilities planning and construction for Virginia Beach City Public Schools, has worked with Ballard on four el-



This sign hangs outside the two doors that open into Ballard's office in Virginia Beach.

ementary schools and is currently working with him to rebuild Kellam High School. He has known Ballard professionally for 20 years from the time when Ballard just did concrete.

"With Steve, what you see is what you get," Arnold said. "He is very aggressive but a straight-up guy who runs his business by being customer-focused. He delivers a quality product on time or ahead of schedule."

"Kellam High School is a very complex building, cutting-edge. He understands that if you make a mistake, you own it, fix it and move on."

Arnold said Ballard had the idea to reuse the lights from the old football field for the new baseball field, saving the school system money.

"With Steve and his people, you feel like you are on the same team,"

Arnold added.

Ballard is currently constructing two high schools in Wise County. Lake Ballard, Jeff Perry, superintendent of Wise County Schools, likes working with PPEA guidelines because of the flexibility.

"With the design, bid, build process if anything goes wrong there is blame being placed between the architects, engineers, construction company. There is no conflict."

Perry added that the PPEA process is embraced by Ballard's approach.

"With Steve, you get value-added engineering and advice," he said. "We are working with a tight budget and he is building a quality building. He is keeping us in our budget and we are still getting a lot of features that are outside the scope."

THE EARLY DAYS

Ballard was a freshman at Old Dominion University in the mid-1970s when he stumbled into the construction business. He was working at renovating houses while attending classes.

While waiting to speak with a professor, he was balancing his checkbook. The professor walked in and caught a glimpse of Ballard's paycheck.

"He said, 'You're making more money than I am,'" Ballard said. "That is when I thought maybe

college was not for me. It would be better for me to complete a trade.”

He now has an honorary degree from ODU, and the school’s football team plays on Foreman Field at Ballard Stadium.

At age 21, in 1978, Ballard started S.B. Ballard Construction Co. as a renovation contracting business in his Norfolk home. He started doing small projects for the Norfolk Housing Authority and Eastern Virginia Medical School and was a subcontractor to larger companies.

He had three employees including his wife BJ, who taught school and served as his bookkeeper until he fired her.

“It was payday and there were no paychecks ready for the guys working on jobs. I asked her why the checks were not ready. She normally did them the night before. She said she had to grade papers that night and did not get to the checks.

“So I had to fire her,” he said, laughing.

That didn’t affect their now 32-year marriage. Ballard said his ac-

complishments would not have been possible without her support.

“I worked all the time,” he said. “She is a good woman. She raised the kids [Stephen Jr., 30, and Stephanie, 25] almost without me.”

Ballard’s big break came with his first general contracting project – the building of several Jiffy Lubes in the area.

But he fell on tough times from 1990 to 1991 when the economy was not good and business was slow.

“I made it a point to call those who I owed money to every Friday at noon,” he said.

Then in 1992 he landed a subcontracting concrete job for the paint shop at the Ford plant in Norfolk.

“That was a good job and really turned things around,” he said.

He used his reference from the Ford plant to land a job at the Union Camp facility in Franklin.

“In one year’s time my lawyer was happy and the banks were happy,” Ballard said.

What kept him going emotionally and mentally?

“My wife stood by me.”

NOT JUST SCHOOLS

While he enjoys working with educators, Ballard’s handiwork can be seen in other parts of Virginia including the seawall at the Oceanfront. This was a time he proved local politicians and city administrators wrong.

The project was set to last five years. Ballard told officials he could do it in less time if he could work one summer so aggressively that the project might hurt nearby businesses. City officials said Oceanfront businesses wouldn’t go for it.

“Let me talk with them,” Ballard challenged.

He gathered 34 business owners in one room and said, “If you let me screw up one of your summers then I can finish way ahead of schedule and not mess with the rest of your summers.

“All 34 of them said do it and we finished one year ahead of schedule.”

“That seawall is one of our jobs I am really proud of,” he said. ☐