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Dozens of companies, several city departments work together to revive Northern

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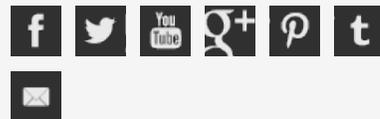


LARRY MAYER/Gazette Staff

Ben Flanagan, of Langlas and Associates, is one of three supervisors on the Northern Hotel reconstruction. Retrofitting the old building to accommodate modern technology took plenty of planning and improvisation.

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This could have been the hotel remodeling project from hell.

Instead, after a year of intensive effort to rebuild the classy old, 10-story Northern Hotel, Langlas & Associates, the general contractor, the architects and even the bankers were happy.

And the ones who really counted — the owners — were smiling, too.

“It has been a wonderful experience. I’m proud of the job Langlas did. They have changed my world view of contractors,” said Billings native Chris Nelson.

However, Billings architect Dennis Deppmeier said that the owners, Chris and Mike Nelson, took some convincing to treat the general contractor as a partner instead of an adversary. That trust kept expensive changes to a minimum, he said.

“The Northern was a high design, very complex building, a historic renovation with a lot of unknowns,” Deppmeier said.

The Northern at 19 N. Broadway was remodeled with less than 1 percent change orders, he said, when changes on historical renovations can hit 12 percent.

Now six years after the bankrupt Northern was padlocked, the Nelsons are throwing an invitation-only party Friday and will reopen their hotel Saturday.

The original Billings landmark that opened at the beginning of the last century burned down Sept. 12, 1940. To make it nearly fireproof, P.B. Moss and Henry W. Rowley rebuilt the Northern with brick and concrete blocks.

Making everything fit within that immovable exterior was this century’s building challenge.

“Probably the hardest part would be the fact there was not a lot of room for all the mechanical and plumbing to get into the building,” said Sam Thelen, owner of G&T Plumbing.

After buying the rundown property at a sheriff’s sale in 2009 for just under \$3 million, the Nelsons decided the hotel needed to be gutted and all the electrical, plumbing and heating and air conditioning systems replaced before the fun part — the decorating — could start.

Chris Nelson, who started a rapid credit check business called Zoot Enterprises, also owns Zoot Construction, which hauled away more than 4,000 tons of debris. Workers had to punch holes in the sidewalk to pull a massive 1940s-era boiler out of the basement.

In 2011, US Bank loaned the Nelsons undisclosed millions to start rebuilding.

One condition was that the Nelsons hire an experienced local contractor. Langlas got the job and 385 days to redo the 160-room hotel, build two restaurants and a catering kitchen.

“We can do all the pretty stuff, but if the heating and electrical systems don’t work, you have nothing,” said Langlas superintendent Ben Flanagan, who specializes in building restaurants.

Langlas project manager Jason Hubbard and three superintendents — Flanagan, Lane Huffman and Jon Kolb — worked with hundreds of people, 20 to 30 companies and five or six city of

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in downtown Billings becomes reality, Mike Nelson said he’s feeling like a kid a... [Read more](#)

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- 697: New doors
 - 70,000: Pounds of stainless steel
 - 48,000: Pounds of granite
 - 120,000: Square feet of wallpaper
 - 450: Gallons of wallpaper paste
 - 81: Miles of electrical wire
 - 411: Gallons carpet glue
 - 13,000: Feet of carpet tack strips
 - 1,620: Gallons of plaster
 - 17,000: Concrete anchors for wall
 - 0: Lost time to accidents
 - 38: Parking tickets for all workers
- Source: Langlas & Associates, general contractor.

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Billings departments often seven days a week for a year.

Most of the planning, praying, snaking and swearing took place in the ceiling space, the project's biggest challenge.

Removing a tile over the main kitchen for the TEN restaurant, Flanagan showed the scant half-inch separation between the wires, conduits and plumbing.

Adding to the ceiling congestion was Chris Nelson's techie demand to add a low-voltage wiring for state-of-the-art lighting and sound and so the Northern's guests could use their rainbow of electronic devices without complicated hookups.

"We were trying to shove 10 pounds of stuff into a two-pound box. That happened a lot," said Kris Koessler, construction manager for A&E Architects.

Working as a team to solve the hotel's unique mechanical issues was quite different from new construction, said Will Perdue, foreman for Electrical ID Corp.

"It was taking history and making it all new," he said. "Everybody actually got along really well."

Chris Schaff, general manager of Air Controls, said his team found surprises almost every time they peeked behind a wall. And there was some heavy lifting.

"Three blowers weighing 2,000 to 3,000 pounds were all lifted up by a crane, but all had to be manhandled into place," he said.

Burtell Fire Protection installed the sprinkler system. Kenco Security installed fire alarms, including establishing two fire safety areas on each floor and three on the ballroom floor.

Until the Empire Parking Garage on Montana Avenue is completed, Northern valets will park guests' cars in a nearby lot that is fenced, lighted and guarded. Or they will validate tickets for parking spaces at city garages.

Contractors said they were happy to land a multi-million dollar project in Billings and have hometown pride in the outcome.

"We really wanted to make it shine for the Nelsons," Flanagan said.

After four years of planning and work, Deppmeier praised the Nelsons' financial commitment to bringing the Northern back as a boutique hotel.

"I hope the community appreciates that," he said. "They didn't do it cheap."

Tags The Northern Hotel, Chris Nelson, Mike Nelson, Chris Schaff, Dennis Deppmeier, Langlas & Associates, Ben Flanagan, Lane Huffman, Jon Kolb, Henry W. Rowley, P.b. Moss, Will Perdue, Zoot Enterprises, U.s. Bank, Jason Hubbard, Kris Koessler, Electrical Id Corp., Air Controls, Empire Parking Garage, Sam Thelen, Burtell Fire Protection

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