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Many eyes on Whole Foods and the Picones



JIM COURTNEY

"Any way you look at it, it's a nice project," Chris Picone, right, said about building the Whole Foods Markets Inc. store in Amherst. "It's just there's a lot more eyes on this than some of the other ones we've worked on." Also pictured are his father, Tony Picone Sr. and his brother, Tony Jr.

BY JAMES FINK

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Anthony Picone Sr. has handled a lot of construction projects.

His company, Picone Construction Corp. in Clarence, has built hotels, remodeled law offices and handled a variety of education-based projects.

But few put the company under the public microscope as much as the region's first Whole Foods Market, scheduled to open Sept. 15.

The 50,000-square-foot store is the anchor and the first visible sign of WS Development's \$75 million makeover of Northtown Plaza in Amherst.

WS Development is headquartered in Massachusetts. For both the developer and the retailer, the plaza project marks their regional debut.

Since being named project contractor, Picone and his sons Anthony Jr. and Chris have fielded daily calls from friends, clients and the public about the progress.

"I don't mind," Picone said. "It certainly gets us noticed."

His company was selected from a group that included local firms and others from outside the region.

"WS liked everything they heard from us and so did Whole Foods," Picone said.

WS Development was in charge and handled bidding for construction of the store's shell. Whole Foods Markets Inc., based in Austin, Texas, handled bidding for the interior buildout.

The project was actually two separate but intertwined phases between the shell construction and the interior work. At times the phases

were handled simultaneously; other times, the focus shifted from one phase to another.

After completion last summer of site work and pre-construction prep, construction began. During the peak construction months, Picone had more than 130 workers on-site from its own company and subcontractors.

Even now, with just a few weeks left until the grand opening of Whole Foods Market, nearly 100 workers are still busy getting the building ready for customers.

"What's great about Whole Foods is that they don't do cookie-cutter jobs," said Chris Picone, director of operations at Picone Construction Corp. "Every job is unique."

The store, which will employ more than 165 full- and part-timers, was designed to be much more than

a place to buy groceries.

Whole Foods designed the Bar 1818 tap room, which will feature a working fireplace, wooden floors and pool tables. Near the cash registers will be a bocce court. Customer-friendly areas are part of the design by the butcher's area, seafood counters and prepared-food section. There's also a motif that pays homage to the city of Buffalo's industrial past.

Picone Construction expects this project to lead to additional work with national companies and local firms.

"We wanted to hit a home run for them (WS Development) and we wanted to hit a home run for Whole Foods," Chris Picone said. "Building a store like this does increase the recognition of Picone Construction and puts us on a very national stage."