Construction market helps engineering firm accelerate expansion

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Building & Earth Sciences Inc. has nearly doubled in size in the past couple months by adding four full-service locations in target markets. Only six years old, the engineering consulting firm has been keeping a close eye on where multi-million construction projects are taking shape, and makes sure it has employees and a lab ready to serve new and existing clients.

Headquartered in Birmingham, B&E now has nine locations, the newest ones in Huntsville; Bentonville, Ark.; Raleigh-Durham; and Louisville, Ky.

Its payroll has risen from fewer than 100 to nearly 130 and it moved up on a national ranking produced by Natick, Mass.-based consulting company ZweigWhite from No. 63 to No. 46. Projected annual revenue in 2005 is $13.23 million, following a significant increase in 2004, when revenue jumped from $6.8 million to $10.8 million over the previous year. Its first year in business, 1999, revenue was $1.5 million.

Among the new employees are the three members of B&E's new quality control department, headed by director Tom Dobras. "We needed an independent group to focus on auditing all our work out in the field," says founder and president Deepa Bhave. "We did not want our managers sacrificing quality for growth."

Bhave attributes the company's remarkable growth to a dedicated work force that takes a hands-on approach.

"Right now we're focusing on staying loyal to the work we have," says Bhave, estimating that at most recent count 96.7 percent of B&E's clients were repeat customers. She says there is plenty of work linked to rebuilding the hurricane-ravaged Gulf Coast, but B&E will leave that to its competitors.

B&E is handling multiple projects related to the automotive, aviation and military sectors. Locally, it won the contract to do site testing for the $500 million Wachovia Data Center, a project it is wrapping up for Atlanta-based Holder Construction Co.

"Our services have not changed from our basic bread and butter, which is foundations, geotechnical work, asphalt, roofing inspections and 2003 IBC (International Building Code) codes which are now being enforced in Alabama. We've been providing those from day one in 30 states," Bhave says.

Looking deep inside walls
B&E has added two key pieces of high-tech equipment that allow for non-invasive inspection of structures. One, the StructureScan Optical, is a ground penetrating radar that allows workers to peer deep inside concrete walls and foundations to check for flaws like cracks and improperly placed re-bar prior to drilling and cutting. Its other new system, an infrared camera, detects thermal energy and produces digital pictures to identify problems like roof leaks and flawed...
electrical systems.

"We've got a significant investment in those pieces of equipment," says business development director Matt Adams. "It's not cheap, but we feel like it's something that will further expand the high level of service we're extending to our clients currently."

Depending on current jobs, the number of employees at each of the nine offices varies, with the Columbus, Ga., office having the most at 25. Next to Birmingham, the Columbus location is the oldest. Some of B&E's newest offices already have significant work, such as the Bentonville location, which is doing the foundation work for a retail center similar in size to a Summit, and a major hospital. Adams compares the growth in the Bentonville area to that of Hoover.

Busy in Huntsville

Bhate and Adams say a broad mix of projects has contributed to B&E's rapid growth, from aviation work in Huntsville to malls and hospitals to significant military projects. Adams says the military work is part of what led the company to open a North Carolina location. B&E is doing foundation and testing work for housing projects in Fort Benning, a $60 million enlisted personnel complex and a massive, 25-year renovation of family housing there with an estimated price tag of $500 million.

B&E is doing the foundation work for a $15 million fitness center on Hunter Army Airfield in Savannah. "A lot of the development going on in the Carolinas and in Georgia is on bases, where the government is upgrading housing that in some cases is 50 years old," Adams says. "They are demolishing houses, building new ones and also building new fitness areas."

Bhate says her company's mission has always been to provide large-company advantages with a small-company feel, and she says she feels B&E has achieved that. She says clients have complimented both the company's consistency and its training program. Bhate says employees assigned to certain projects undergo intensive client-specific training before they even start.

"When I started this company, my vision was a company where (potential employees and clients) would want to break the doors down, and we're seeing that happen. We did not start out saying we wanted to be the biggest or have the highest profit margin or any of these things, but the growth is very satisfying."

Bhate has stopped being surprised by her company's success. "Every year I have said we are not going to be able to repeat this, but we have."

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