

Finding a niche and filling it

Millennia growing its engineering services business while others cut back

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MORTON — Paul Moreno and his partners seem to have a knack for being in the right place at the right time.

As a result, their business — Millennia Professional Services — is growing at a time most others are cutting back because Moreno, the company president, and partners Ramon Dela Cruz and Thomas Ngo — with a combined 54 years of experience — are able to fill in the gaps.

The company, which provides its clients with engineering, surveying and construction services, recently moved its main office from East Peoria to Morton because it needed more space. From a start of two employees in 2004, employment is now 20 and Moreno expects that to double within a few years.

That's where he and his partners want to stay, Moreno said from the new office at 850 N. Main St. in Morton, the former Roecker Cabinets building. The company also has a smaller office in Lombard, headed by Dela Cruz.

“Personally, I think 40 would be a good number. If we get too big, I think we'd start to see our communications break down. If you get much bigger than that there are too many layers and then management begins to lose personal contact with its employees,” Moreno said.

He said he speaks from experience, which is why Millennia was founded. He and his partners worked at a much larger engineering and construction company, Bolingbrook-based B3 Cos. They became familiar with Peoria when sent here by B3 to work on the Interstate 74 reconstruction project.

Millennia partners found Peoria a good place to set up their own business and, using the contacts they made from the I-74 project, they've been able to get their business going and growing.

“We'd all been at B3 and we just started talking about it. It grew from there. We're happy with it,” Moreno said.

He's happy for another reason: A native of small-town Sterling and married to a small-town girl from neighboring Rock Falls, Moreno was tiring of the “rat race” of living in a Chicago suburb, including the rush hour commute.

“This is much more comfortable,” said Moreno, who now lives with his family in Washington. “This area is a good size for us.”

The Illinois Department of Transportation is Millennia's chief client so far. That agency, Moreno said, already used a lot of consultants and that has grown with the economic downturn that caused IDOT to cut back employment and implement a hiring freeze. “That's bad for them but I will admit it has been good for us because they need help keeping up with their workload, especially with the stimulus money coming in. We're doing a lot of consulting work in IDOT districts we're most familiar with,” he said.

Millennia started as strictly an engineering firm, but has added surveying and construction services. That it needed space for equipment was one reason it looked for a larger building, which the company couldn't find to fit its needs in East Peoria.

The former Roecker building fit the bill — or at least it will come September, when Millennia can take over the front half of the building that is now leased to another company. “It's a good location here and Morton has good access from several directions. That's one of the reasons it was appealing to us,” Moreno said.

Jennifer Daly, CEO of the Morton Economic Development Council, said that, when Millennia came to her agency, “we wanted to make sure they had already looked at all the possibilities in East Peoria.”

Satisfied that was the case, she said, East Peoria officials were supportive of the move to Morton “because they wanted to keep the company in this region.”

Daly and others helped Millennia find a building, then secure funds from Heritage Bank and the Tazewell County Revolving Loan Fund to purchase it.

Millennia, said Daly, is Morton's kind of business. “Morton has a history of cultivating entrepreneurs,” she said, citing Core Construction, Morton Buildings and Morton Metalcraft, among others. “I think it's a combination of factors, but Morton is a place where businesses stay because families stay together. This community understands entrepreneurs,” she said.

Part of that Moreno already understands, he said.

“It's about relationships. We're in a relationship business. Being a good engineer doesn't make one a good business owner, so my partners and I have learned a lot about building relationships.”

And part of that “is putting our people before profits. We try and take care of our people first, which isn’t always easy when we also need to make money to grow the business.”

Millennia is looking forward to getting more work as the federal stimulus money helps states and municipalities fix and build roads.

The company also may do more subdivision work. It is doing one now called Trails at Timber Oaks.

Moreno also hopes to use part of the company’s new space to be sort of an incubator for other engineering firms. “We’ve been fortunate to be where we are. If we can help other get a start that will be a way to give back,” he said.

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