

From small business to powerhouse

Hill-Engineers, Architects, Planners marking 75th anniversary

BY JOHN TOWNES

DALTON — It started as a one-person business focused on mechanical engineering for the Berkshire's once burgeoning paper industry.

Seventy five years later, Hill-Engineers, Architects, Planners Inc. has some 40 people on staff, and has grown into the Berkshire's largest full-service, architectural, engineering and civil surveying firm.

"Not many companies in the region can do it all," said Hill's vice president, Vin Magnano, who has been with the company since the 1970s. "Clients appreciate having everything available under one roof."

Headquartered at 50 Depot St. in Dalton, Hill provides an array of services to commercial, industrial, governmental, institutional and individual clients. The company has played a key role in building and development projects throughout the Berkshires and beyond, including many familiar structures and sites.

Hill, which also has an office at 44 Spring St. in Adams, handles most aspects of planning and preparation for small, mid-sized and large projects encompassing site and infrastructure development, construction of new buildings, and repairs and upgrades of existing facilities. It is not a construction company, but collaborates with contractors during the building phase.

Specific services include structural, mechanical, and electrical engineering, architectural design, surveying, land-use planning, project management, cost estimations, specifications, environmental sustainability, remediation, and support for clients through the regulatory review and permitting process, among others.

According to Magnano, it's this diversity that enables Hill to internally integrate all facets of a project, like engineering and architectural design, which increases the company's efficiency. From a business perspective, this diversified approach also provides Hill with a balance of income sources to handle fluctuations in demand for individual services, and in specific markets and industries.

"We don't put all of our eggs in one basket," Magnano said.

Hill primarily serves Berkshire County, the Pioneer Valley and the Springfield area in Massachusetts, and nearby sections of New York, Vermont and Connecticut.

“We describe our market as covering a 50-mile radius although we also do jobs further away sometimes,” said company president Jeff Noble.

Hill will be celebrating its 75th anniversary later this year, and plans to mark that occasion by placing a time capsule in the ground containing items that reflect the company’s activities and history.

MODEST BEGINNINGS

Originally known as W.T. Hill Inc., the company was founded in 1949 by William T. Hill, a former engineer with Crane & Co. The firm originally focused on providing mechanical engineering for the pulp and paper industry. Founded in 1801, Crane & Co. supplies currency paper to the U.S. government, and has been the government’s sole supplier since 1964.

Over the years, Hill slowly added services and began to take on clients in other categories. When Magnano joined the firm in the 1970s, Hill only had about a dozen employees on staff.

In 1980, a group of five employees purchased the company’s fixed assets and reputation, and founded Hill Engineering, Inc. The company changed its name to Hill-Engineers, Architects, Planners, Inc. in 1987. Hill is a privately held C-Corporation, a business structure that allows the firm’s owners to be legally separate from the business itself. It allows the company to issue shares and pass on profits while limiting the liability of both the shareholders and the directors, according to Investopedia.com. C corporations are owned by the shareholders, all of whom own stock in the company.

Under this structure, C corporations can have an unlimited number of investors. One of the shareholders main tasks is electing the firm’s board of directors.

Hill’s diversification and expansions resulted from strategic planning and circumstances that arose along the way, according to both Magnano and Noble.

“In addition to deliberate steps to expand, our evolution has also been driven by opportunities that presented themselves, such as when a client would ask for a service we didn’t do at the time,” Noble said. “If the service was a logical fit, we’d add it.”

As an example, Noble said Hill expanded its services a few years ago when it acquired West Stockbridge Enterprises, a civil surveying firm.

“Land surveying was not something we had been looking to get into,” Noble said. “But when the chance to acquire that business came along, it made sense. So now, if a client has a parcel of land, we can offer everything from the initial site survey through other phases.”

Hill’s earlier movement to expand beyond the paper industry was also an outgrowth of the company’s original activities.

“Initially, we only worked on buildings when they housed some aspect of a paper operation,” Magnano said. “But people in other industries noticed what we did and started coming to us for those services, too.”

Broadening the company’s services was also necessary as the Berkshire paper industry began to decline.

“Being able to serve clients in other industries made up for that,” Magnano said.

Hill added a full range of architectural services to its portfolio when Noble, a certified architect, joined the firm in 1986.

This allowed the company to expand its scope beyond industrial facilities into other forms of development and construction. Today, Hill’s projects also include scientific labs and technology centers, residential and commercial developments, corporate offices, hospitals, resorts, schools, roads, parks, solar arrays, churches, and many others.

Hill adapted to the increasing emphasis on environmental stability when it joined the Green Building Council, which gave the company the credentials and capacity to design LEED certified green buildings.

Being involved in the preparation of projects means that at times Hill’s services overlap, which places the company in competition with construction companies and other contractors. But those relationships are symbiotic.

“We understand what contractors need and we work together, well,” Noble said.

On some projects, Hill hires contractors. On other projects they are retained by a contractor to perform specific services.

Vin Magnano and Jeff Noble, from left, are the principals of Hill-Engineering, Architects, Planners Inc. of Dalton. Magnano, the firm’s vice president, joined the company in the 1970s. Noble, the company’s president, arrived in 1986. BEN GARVER

“We also partner on design-build projects,” Noble said.

Hill’s diversity is reflected in the company’s portfolio of past and current clients. It includes manufacturing and construction firms like General Dynamics Advanced Mission Systems, Lenco Inc., Neenah Paper, Unistress Corp., Crane, Smith and Wesson and Phillips. Hill has also worked with financial firms like Greylock Federal Credit Union, and has clients in the hospitality and recreation sector like Jiminy Peak Mountain Resort, Canyon Ranch and the Kripalu Center for Yoga and Health. Hill has provided services on individual homes and at residential developments like Ashmere Landing in Hinsdale.

The company has also worked with numerous institutions and nonprofit organizations like Berkshire Health Systems, the county’s largest employer, the Brien Center, the Boys and Girls Club of the Berk-shires, Clark Art Institute, Community Health Programs and the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art. Past clients also include schools and colleges, municipalities, state agencies and churches.

Hill often provides support for non-profit projects and organizations through reduced fees, in-kind services, contributions, and other forms of assistance.

“We’re very community- oriented, and that aspect of our work is important to us,” Noble said. “So whenever possible, we treat those jobs a little bit differently.”

Hill played a key role in the \$40 million expansion and modernization of an industrial facility for Weidmann Electrical Technology in St. Johnsbury, Vt. Closer to home, the company has provided work on some highly visible local projects like the new Taconic and Wahconah high schools, the Mahaiwe Performing Arts Center in Great Barrington, and the Proprietors Lodge restaurant and event facility on Pontoosuc Lake in Pittsfield. Hill partnered with the Allegrone Companies on the recent renovation and modernization of the Pittsfield YMCA.

The company’s work on these bigger projects is offset by the services it has performed on less notable but important structural, mechanical and technical upgrades.

Hill restored the historic Lee Congregational Church in Lee and provided Hill expertise to the First Baptist Church in Pittsfield through a grant from the Massachusetts Historical Commission.

Like all businesses, Hill has had to adapt to many changes over the past 75 years, such as new technology and materials, increased costs, and more stringent and complex building codes and regulations.

While Hill has numerous long-term clients, that form of partnership is becoming less

prevalent.

“Companies thought differently in the past,” said Magnano. “They would develop relationships with contractors they worked with regularly, and when they needed something done, they would give the job to them. But now companies will put out a project for bids instead. So it’s become much more competitive.”

Noble attributed this change to the consolidation of the economy, as independent companies with regional roots have been acquired by large outside corporations and investors.

“With corporate takeovers, those formerly independent companies have to answer to the stockholders, and face more pressure to reduce costs whenever possible,” he said.

Hill has grown and diversified, but it continues to be an independent, locally owned business with a regional orientation. That has been a conscious decision by the company.

“We’ve had many offers from larger firms and brokers to be acquired, but we have chosen not to do that,” Noble said. “We prefer to be able to make decisions ourselves and run the business in the way that we think is best. Also, we’re very family oriented, and we believe that operating independently is better for our employees and for the community.”

Like many Berkshire firms, Hill has had trouble attracting younger staffers. The company employs many professionals with varied skills, including those in specialized disciplines such as architecture and engineering.

“A large proportion of our staff have been here for many years which is an advantage,” said Noble. “However, we have the same problem that many companies here have in attracting young talent. We have to work a lot harder to fill vacant positions than we used to. I think young professionals often prefer to be in larger cities where there are more opportunities and chances to work on projects that might be more glamorous.”

“It seems that when people get a little older and have families, they want to come back to a place like the Berk-shires,” he said. The company’s goal of remaining independent reflects its approach to employment.

“It’s important how you treat employees,” Noble said. “We make an effort to attract and encourage employees to make a commitment to staying with us for the long-term. We’re fortunate in being able to have brought in a number of younger professionals who want to follow in our footsteps and keep it going as a successful independent business into the future.”

Workers perform tasks while working on the \$40 million expansion and modernization of an industrial facility for Weidmann Electrical Technology in St. Johnsbury, Vt. Hill-Engineering, Architects, Planners Inc. of Dalton played a key role in this project. HILL-ENGINEERING, ARCHITECTS, PLANNERS INC

The new 6,500-square-foot basketball court is one of the new features that were added during the recent \$12.4 million renovation of the Berkshire Family YMCA's facility in Pittsfield. Hill-Engineering, Architects, Planners Inc. of Dalton is one of the local firms that worked on the project, which began in October 2021 and was completed in May. HILL-ENGINEERING, ARCHITECTS, PLANNERS INC.

The workspace at Hill-Engineering, Architects, Planners Inc. in Dalton. The company now has 40 employees and began as a one-person operation in 1949. The firm is marking its 75th anniversary in 2024. BEN GARVER

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