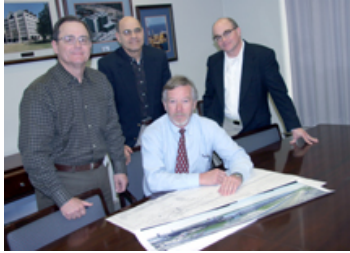


Engineers cash in on cleanups

By: Christian Moises, News Editor | March 19, 2007 | 0



Charles Nelson, seated, president and chairman of Waldemar S. Nelson and Co., discusses rig plans with, from left: James Melancon, senior vice president, James Cospolich, executive vice president, and Kenneth Nelson, senior vice president. (Photo by Christian Moises)

Engineering firms in the metro area finished 2006 by posting nearly 50 percent revenue increases over 2005.

An influx in environmental engineering, from the continued return of oil and gas platforms to hurricane protection projects, put two of New Orleans' largest firms in the limelight.

"Year in and year out, 95 percent of the work we do is with people we have done work with in the past," said Waldemar S. Nelson and Co. President and Chairman Charles Nelson. "We have taken on new clients, though, from out of state who are getting involved with levee rebuilding and coastal restoration because they know we're a longstanding local resource."

The business workload left the firm overworked and understaffed.

"People have been working six days a week for 18 months," Nelson said. "About 98 percent of our employees were back in the St. Charles Avenue office within a few weeks after the storm. But the hard part is finding people to do the job in New Orleans."

Nelson remains optimistic, though.

"The amount of work over the next decade will continue to drive additional people and clients to the region," he said.

The firm is helping the state Department of Environmental Resources with hurricane protection projects.

"We've been tasked in the early stages to study how to use sediment in marsh recovery," Nelson said. "But we're waiting anxiously for the appropriate funding."

Wink Cos. LLC, which relocated its headquarters to Baton Rouge after Hurricane Katrina, continues to

add employees to meet demand.

The move split employees from the former eastern New Orleans headquarters between the Baton Rouge office, which now has 225 employees, and the James Business Park in St. Charles Parish, which now has more than 250 employees.

Wink's downtown office returned to the city last spring in the Entergy building and is up to 22 employees.

Waldemar S. Nelson has 30 percent more employees since Katrina, up from 191 to 233, while its Houston office, opened in 1999, has grown from 72 to 128.

All firms are adding services to compete.

"I am convinced that the ability for our company to grow to the next level requires our presence in the global marketplace," said Wink Cos. President and CEO Larry Wink.

The firm's first international office in Algeria is undertaking several major development projects.

"It is an exciting, challenging endeavor," said Wink, who said the Algeria business will be a springboard to other international markets in northern Africa, the Middle East and the Far East.

Waldemar S. Nelson officials said increased crude prices stimulated projects in the past year in coastal Louisiana, Texas, the Rockies and Indonesia, where the firm works with Freeport McMoRan.

"Growth and globalization do not mean leaving Louisiana or Mississippi but enhancing our regional presence," Wink said. "They are the way for us to continue to provide a quality workplace for the hard-working and resilient citizens of southern Louisiana and Mississippi, as we deliver a quality, cost effective service to our many customers."

In addition to Wink purchasing a 57,000-square-foot office in Baton Rouge in June, the company has leased space in two additional buildings in Baton Rouge and plans to open another office in Covington.

The company also has offices in Lafayette and Biloxi, Miss., a sales office in Houston and is laying the groundwork for expansion in Texas.

The private sector lost one firm, W.H. Linder & Associates, in an October 2006 acquisition by Pasadena, Calif.-based Jacobs Engineering Group.

"We are pleased to announce the acquisition of this world-class organization," Jacobs President Craig Martin said in a press release. "Linder complements our existing upstream business and plays an integral part in our strategic initiative to expand our upstream and offshore capabilities, widening the services that both companies offer to their respective clients."

Linder officials did not return phone calls.