

Transit planners take A train to success

DKS Associates
solve transit,
traffic problems

Working on the BART SFO extension was thrilling for Spencer when he was first hired.

SPENCER BROWN

BY T.S. MILLS-FARAUDO
San Francisco Business Times Contributor

DKS Associates started in 1979 as just a small group of engineers working on easing traffic through Berkeley.

Twenty-nine years later it has grown into a \$19-million-a-year transportation engineering and planning firm with a long list of clients.

While the employee-owned company continues to head smaller projects, like school drop-off and pick-up operations, it is tackling major transportation planning efforts, including co-managing congestion reduction on Interstate 80 through the Bay Area for the Alameda County Congestion Management Agency.

The \$87.7 million project is designed to provide relief on the Bay Area's most congested freeway segment. DKS is designing software that will help the agency find ways to use the section of I-80 from the Carquinez Bridge to the Bay Bridge more efficiently so additional lanes don't have to be built. They are looking at everything from changing speed limits to adjusting timing on ramp meters to changing how the lanes are used. DKS received the \$4.8 million contract with Alameda through the county's consultant Kimley Horn & Associates, and it's expected to span over five years.

These types of government contracts are why the company has grown its revenue by 25 percent over the last three years. The opportunities stem in part from Congress' recent passage of several transportation bills to improve the nation's infrastructure.

The firm, which was also recently named the traffic engineering consultant to the city of Beverly Hills, has grown to 135 employees, and in February it opened an outpost in Dallas, bringing its tally of offices to eight.

In April, the firm was awarded a \$15 million contract from Caltrans to develop plans for major travel corridors throughout the state. It's part of Prop. 1B's corridor mobility improvement project. It will use intelligent transportation systems and active traffic management as well as modeling systems that can forecast future traffic scenarios and show how different strategies — from carpooling lanes to express lanes — would affect conditions.

About 80 percent of the firm's work is for government agencies, and in recent years, it has worked on such crucial projects as the SFO BART extension and the light rail system in Portland, Ore.

"We're very lucky. There's very few people who can go to work every day and say I can change the world, and we can," said Western Region Manager Randy McCourt, who oversees the Oakland headquarters as well as offices in Sacramento, Seattle, Irvine, Portland and Salem, Ore. "These projects are for the benefit of everyone."

The six original principals of the company broke off from another transportation company, DeLeuw Cather, because they wanted to start a company that had a more diverse client base, said McCourt, who was one of the first junior employees hired in 1979. DeLeuw Cather had mainly larger clients and the DKS founders wanted to work with smaller agencies as well. Using their own money to start DKS, the founders didn't get a salary during the first six months. Richard Sauve, who is the current DKS president, is the only one among the original principals still with the company.

After opening the headquarters in Oakland in 1979, the firm opened offices in Los Angeles, Sacramento, Portland, Salem, Ore., Tampa, Fla., Seattle and Dallas.

It now provides planning and design services for the private sector and public agencies covering all modes of transportation, including cars, buses, trains and even bicycles.

McCourt said the secret to the company's success is the employees.

"Some of the kids we recruit out of school are some of the brightest we've seen," he said.

Mark Spencer, Oakland office manager, oversees the headquarter's financial, recruiting and technical aspects. He remembers how thrilled he was when DKS hired him out of UC Berkeley as an engineer in the 1990s to work on the SFO BART expansion, but not every project has been smooth. DKS has run into some problems since many agencies want them to sign clauses in contracts that say they will be held responsible for anything that goes wrong, even if it's not the company's fault. For example, if DKS is working on traffic signal timing project for a city and someone gets rear-ended, the company would be held responsible. In these cases, they have to refuse to work with those agencies.

"We're willing to accept responsibility for things we're responsible for," Spencer said.

McCourt said they are hoping to get California lawmakers to change this.

James Helmer, director of transportation for San Jose, said all of the projects the city has hired DKS for have been successful. Recently, DKS designed message signs that direct people toward parking lots around the city and cameras that allow staff to decide if timing needs to be changed on signals to make traffic flow better.

"We have utilized all of the technology DKS designed in a effective manner," Helmer said. "Mark Spencer leads the company with a lot of integrity."

sanfrancisco@bizjournals.com ■

SNAPSHOT: DKS Associates

What it does: Transportation planning and engineering firm offering services in traffic engineering, intelligent transportation systems, traffic control systems, traffic signal design and parking.

Location: Oakland.

President: Richard Sauve.

2007 revenue: \$19 million.

2006: \$16.9 million.

2005: \$15.1 million.

Founded: 1979.

Number of employees: 135.

Web site: dksassociates.com.