

Builder finds refuge from economy in public projects

BY MICHELLE LEACH

Medill News Service

When the economy went south last year, John Ochoa had no fears about the viability of Oak Brook-based FGM Architects Engineers.

"We were in a better position than many in the industry because of the type of work we do," said Ochoa, chief executive officer and president of the employee-owned firm.

The firm specializes in public sector work — the village hall, the school, the fire station.

"Working in the public sector means we don't react to the market as quickly as those in the private sector," Ochoa said.

Bloomington School District 13 Superintendent Jerome E. Gordon is one of the 80 percent of clients that Ochoa said return.

Gordon worked with FGM on projects geared toward teaching students safety skills and on construction projects at Bloomington Elementary School.

"FGM stands out in terms of hearing what the school district wants," Gordon said. "They have spent many

Business profile

Name: FGM Architects Engineers

Founded: 1945

Location: Based in Oak Brook

Web site: www.fgm-inc.com

Philosophy: "To enhance communities by creating quality environments."

hours listening very carefully to our expectations, our needs and our wants."

He is currently working with FGM on additions to Bloomingdale Junior High School, including a 14,000-square-foot gymnasium and 10 classrooms.

Ochoa said more economically sensitive markets — like commercial real estate — may be stopped "dead in their tracks" by rough economic times.

But the projects of his rapidly growing, 100-person, six-office firm are "often budgeted years in advance and these are projects the community really needs," Ochoa said. "You can't stop things like schools from being built."



TANIT JARUSAN/DAILY HERALD

John Ochoa is the chief executive officer of FGM Architects Engineers, with headquarters in Oak Brook and four other offices around the state, including one in Lake in the Hills.

This emphasis on the public sector comes the firm's small-town roots.

Founded in 1945 as Fields, Goldman and Magee in Mt. Vernon — a town of 17,000 people in southern Illinois — FGM was built around a "community-based" approach.

It sounds corny, but it's worked, even in the Chicago metropolitan area, where the firm participates actively in civic and charitable undertakings in client communities.

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Public: Recent projects include condos, school

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The firm also emphasizes marketing.

Through the years, FGM added its headquarters in Oak Brook and offices in Chicago, Belleville, Lake in the Hills and Peoria, blanketing Illinois from top to bottom.

The firm's marketing manager, Robin Reid-Murphy, said the multiple locations are advantageous.

"We have six offices across the state, so we have a wide variety of resources," Reid-Murphy said. "So when a particular market starts to flounder, another market can pick up the slack."

But Ochoa said public-sector work isn't immune to pressures.

"The impact for us comes when people are afraid for their jobs and vote 'no' on municipal referendums," he said. "So it ultimately impacts us, but more slowly than those in other markets."

Also, Ochoa said, "as society progresses, it's taken on a more legalistic quality. You have to thoroughly detail everything ... and you've had to get faster at the same time."

The danger of malpractice lawsuits is especially great for those working in the public sector, said James Woods, executive vice president and head of the Oak Brook and Chicago offices.

When the firm's plans go out for public bid by contractors, "you've got to be very specific so people know just what they're getting," Woods said. "You need to work back and forth with your clients to make sure they know what you're providing."

FGM has a staff of four marketers, two of whom serve dual roles as office manager.

"When we go into the community, we aren't just looking for a project," Reid-Murphy said. "We're looking to build long-term relationships with our clients."

She said this personal approach separates FGM from others in the business. "We get involved in the community, whether through charitable contributions or through donating our time."

Among projects Ochoa is proudest of is the firm's work on the state's largest junior high school, transforming abandoned industrial land into a 410,000-square-foot building in Cicero.

"The school district has a high percentage of low-income minority students, and it's seen a tremendous amount of growth," he said.

The property proved a challenge. The land had a long history of industrial contamination. It took a year and \$10 million to make the former home of Danley Machine Works suitable for the 4000-student Unity Junior High School, which is slated to open in fall 2003.

Other major projects the firm is working on include a project comprising 1,000 condos, retail and office space in Evanston; additions and renovation at McHenry East and McHenry West High Schools; construction of the new Prospect Heights City Hall; and a comprehensive upgrade of more than 2,000 units of military housing at Great Lakes Naval Training Center.

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