

NEW RIVER VALLEY CURRENT BUSINESS

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A sight becoming familiar to motorists around the New River Valley and along I-81 are aerial photography reference targets laid down by Anderson & Associates. They are for a survey being conducted for the Virginia Department of Transportation.

KIM ALAN/Staff

The fruits of his labor

"HARD WORK" was the vision that drove Anderson & Associates' Ken Anderson as he engineered his business.

By STEPHEN FOSTER
STAFF WRITER

BLACKSBURG — Ken Anderson was one of the hundreds of budding engineers Virginia Tech graduated that spring, like every spring, looking for

real-world jobs to make their long toil through the university's engineering program worthwhile.

It was 27 years ago that Anderson the student was seeking a graduate degree in civil engineering from the university, at the same time working out of his house on Eakin Street to make a modest living.

In those days, Anderson helped pay his bills doing survey work. Blueprints from back then — produced in his garage — sport signs of his situation: bug splatters from insects attracted by the lights

used to produce the prints.

His vision then: "None," he said. "Just go out there and work."

Meager beginnings for a company — Anderson & Associates — that now employs more than a hundred people in three buildings on Ardmore Street and operates offices in Richmond; Greensboro, N.C.; and Gray, Tenn.

Nowadays, Anderson pays more attention to the big picture.

"Now I deal more with looking to

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Fruits

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where we're headed," said Anderson, 56. "I can let go of the pieces. I'm really more interested in how they all fit together."

The pieces are projects. Projects such as redesigning several sections of U.S. 58; preparing plans for half of the Huckleberry Trail; designing a new parking facility for Radford University; performing survey and design work for Tech's Corporate Research Center buildings; designing waste-water treatment facilities and landfills.

The myriad of white X's you may have seen along Interstate 81 and around Blacksburg and Christiansburg? Anderson & Associates' handiwork. The X's have been laid out so the company can do aerial photography for the Virginia Department of Transportation, which plans to widen I-81 and build the proposed "smart" road and U.S. 460 bypass connector.

How the pieces all fit together has more to do with how the company is run and where it's going, something about which Anderson seems more predisposed to muse.

Anderson likes to talk about books. He offhandedly mentions W. Edwards Deming, the business management philosopher whose ideas went far toward revolutionizing Japanese industry — and are being taken to heart more and more by American companies these days. Deming's ideas on continuous quality improvement, worker involvement and the flattening of corporate hierarchies are "kind of second nature to engineers," Anderson said.

He talks about treating employees right and giving them freedom to run their projects as if they were running their own company.

They are.

Anderson is quick to comment on

the benefits of his firm's employee stock-ownership plan, which gives each employee who has been with the company at least a year a stake in its success that amounts to more than just a pay stub. In nine years, Anderson said, he wants to retire and sell his own stock back to the company — thereby transferring ownership to the people whose careers he has helped and who have helped make his company.

Tech's proximity is a "huge advantage," Anderson said, giving many young engineers their first job experience, and providing a direct line of job applicants. Of 93 full-time workers, 54 are graduates of Tech or Montgomery County high schools.

Last year, the company had revenues of \$4 million-plus. R.A. "Chip" Worley, executive vice president and an employee for 20 years, said the total value of the projects the firm is currently involved in amounts to \$12.5 million.

Anderson said the firm's financial records are open to all who work there, meaning anyone can check pay scales, profits and revenues, contracts and other money matters.

"The whole shebang — it's right there," he said.

That openness, he said, went a long way to smoothing over tensions in the early 1990s when times were tough. The company had to borrow money just to make payroll then, but it has never had to lay off anyone, he said.

Part of Anderson & Associates' success, his would-be competitors contend, has to do with niches the different firms fill.

Both Bill Aden, chief executive officer of Draper Aden Associates, and Bob Roberts, president of Olver Inc., two of the better-known engineering firms in Blacksburg, said the companies compete directly less than one might think.

"The fact of the matter is that we all do different things," Aden said. Anderson & Associates' focus on highway projects isn't followed by the other firms,

which focus more on environmental and industrial projects, the companies' leaders said.

"Personally, I think the world of Ken," Aden said. "Professionally, I think the world of him."

But there's no way the New River Valley could support all three firms anyway, Roberts said, and with each company possessing satellite offices elsewhere, "we all work in a lot of different places, not just Blacksburg."

All three firms have done projects for the town in the last five years, though Adele Schirmer, Blacksburg's director of planning and engineering, is leery of commenting on the abilities of a single firm, citing a strong need for objectivity.

"We select the firm that is most qualified" for each project, she said. "We don't pick one and use them for 10 years."

There are instances, however, when a good job on one project leads to further success.

Anderson cites the Transportation Department's selection of his firm to design the Glade Road widening project in Blacksburg three years ago as a key moment in the company's growth.

Since then, VDOT has employed the company in an open-ended contract to do ground survey work on road projects in Western Virginia.

"I find them very easy to deal with," said Dan Brugh, resident engineer for the department's Christiansburg office. "They're very capable; they have capable people that understand what they're trying to do."

"Our highway work has been the key" to moving into the rest of the state, said Worley, who estimates that 30 percent of the company's business is tied to highway contracts.

For all Anderson's talk about philosophy, openness and be-kind-to-your-employees, the company is an

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engineering firm after all, and engineering firms design and build. Flushing the toilet, getting a glass of water, driving from Blacksburg to Radford — everyday actions all. But an engineer made them possible.

"It takes some thought to make sure [a] building drains properly," Worley said, explaining the hand that engineers play in a host of taken-for-granted acts. "People just figure when you turn that faucet on, water's going to come out."

The nature of engineering firms is that they are also often involved in projects that attract controversy in the political arena. Anderson & Associates is no exception.

Some of the recent headlines the company has had a part in

creating include: working with the developers of a proposed retirement community — Patton's Grant — in Blacksburg; assisting the builders of the Tekoa Inc. group home for troubled youth in Floyd County; survey and design work for Tech's baby — the smart road.

"Typically, the type of things that generate controversy, we're the first ones to discover it," said Stowe, vice president of transportation planning and surveying.

"We're right in the middle of it," said Anderson. "It's exasperating . . . because we're spending money because of the political process. I'm not real patient with the political process, but I am a part of it."

Stowe and other engineers know their work, by the very nature of building things, isn't usually going to have a beneficial impact on the environment.

But Gary Crouch, vice president of engineering, points to his

work in developing an innovative solution to waste-water management for the Mountain Lake resort as an example of how engineers devise systems in as environmentally conscious a way as possible.

Because the resort was not able to treat water and release it directly into the lake, or into nearby creeks which eventually flow underground and take their water who knows where, Crouch helped design a system which treats the water, then sprays it directly into the surrounding woods, where it receives additional, natural treatment.

An environmental engineer, Crouch said the engineer's mission is to minimize the environmental impact of his work — and design the best possible product for his client. "So much of what we do, people use every day but have no idea."

Said Anderson: "Generally we're trying to do things better. That's the assignment we have."
