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Summit Construction moves close to Vero Beach Airport

BYLINE: BILL CHURCH BJ contributor

Eight years ago, Summit Construction Management began life with partners Brad Schuh and Chris Vasquez working out of Schuh's Vero Beach house.

In just a few months, Schuh, Vasquez and their five Summit Construction employees will move to a new 30,000-square-foot building that Summit is buying near the Vero Beach Airport in partnership with another firm.

It's a mark of just how far the company has come. Summit has grown steadily in a strong niche market, the cities and schools of Indian River and St. Lucie counties. Annual revenues are up to \$10-12 million.

With 80 to 90 percent of their present business in municipal and school construction, does Summit fear a slowdown because of government cutbacks and shrinking school budgets?

"It's a worrisome thing," Schuh said. "I still think there's enough work."

The partners are optimistic because of ongoing contracts. Summit will spend the next year renovating and expanding the Vero Beach Airport terminal building. The firm just won the \$3.1 million project to build a new music wing at Sebastian River Middle School.

"We have confidence in our county," Vasquez said.

Summit has several competitive strengths. It is a bonded company, a requirement for doing municipal work that few other firms in the region possess.

Another strength is the firm's versatility.

"We're a small company, but we can do projects ranging from very small to multi-million dollars," Schuh said.

Vasquez said they generally bid on jobs in the \$500,000 to \$5 million range.

Recent projects include the clubhouse at Pointe West, which won an Indian River Chamber of Commerce award for architectural beauty, the four-building Gifford Alternative Education Campus and Pochantans Park in Vero Beach.

Keeping in-house staff to a small number, Summit operates as a general contractor hiring only local subcontractors. Most of those firms have worked with Summit many times.

"Relationships are the backbone of our business," Schuh said. "We found our team is best made up of small contractors. They give us favored treatment by meeting our work schedules and helping us on price because we treat them fairly and pay them quickly."

Summit's subcontractors work only on commercial or government projects.

"It's a different kind of business from residential," Schuh added. "It's a different mentality, a different pace."

With the slowdown in the home building industry, Schuh and Vasquez see more residential contractors trying to crack the commercial market. The competition is heating up, especially from contractors that started in the hurricane clean-up years of 2004 and 2005.

Most of Summit's clients come back. As a result, the company does lots of negotiated work in addition to answering requests for competitive bids.

Summit's clients include Indian River Community College, the Indian River School District, Indian River County Public Works, the City of Vero Beach, St. Lucie County and the City of Fort Pierce.

Schuh laughs that Summit has worked on every school campus in Indian River, everything from fixing a door or window to building a campus.

"We know how to work within the school's schedules, work around students and back off during the FCAT testing periods," Schuh said.

Like any school contractor, Summit complies with rules that require its employees and subcontractor employees to go through criminal background checks under the Jessica Lunsford act designed to find potential sexual predators.

Schuh, 44, and Vasquez, 48, have always worked in commercial construction. They met while working for another Vero Beach contractor, a relationship that dates back 16 years.

Schuh serves as president and project manager, the desk job, while Vasquez prefers being outside as vice president and operations manager. It was always that way.

The two equal partners have similar backgrounds. Schuh is a Vero Beach High School graduate and earned a degree in building construction from the University of Florida. Vasquez is a Miami native and a business school graduate of Eastern Kentucky University.

Both worked construction in high school and college and both fled the traffic and congestion of South Florida. Schuh began his career in West Palm Beach, hated it, and couldn't wait to come home to Vero Beach. Schuh and Vasquez believe in giving back to the community. Summit was named a Company of the Year by the

Indian River Chamber of Commerce in part because of its donations of time and money to many local organizations.

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