

PROFILE

Building on the firm's foundations

Thomas Sexton heads Campus Construction Management Group, founded in 2008

By MARY STONE

Opportunities and challenges, almost in equal measure, face Campus Construction Management Group Inc. as it has stepped out from the umbrella of Christa Construction LLC and looks beyond K-12 projects.



With school in summer recess, Campus Construction's season is in full swing with 20 projects in Rochester, Buffalo and the Southern Tier. In its first year as a solo operation, the Perinton firm had approximately \$9 million in 2009 revenue; it is on track for similar revenue in 2010.

Still, the recession, state budget problems and the administrative intricacies of Campus Construction's employee-owned structure have been challenges for its leadership.

Thomas Sexton, 53, had been heading Christa's K-12 management division for eight years when David Christa chose him to become Campus Construction's president and trustee.

The employee-owned entity was part of Christa's succession plan, Sexton explains.

"Somewhere around 2008, Dave Christa made a concerted effort to say, 'OK, what am I going to do in terms of a succession plan?' He does not have sons; he has daughters, none of whom are part of the business," Sexton says.

The company's K-12 management division was one of three fundamental divisions at Christa, alongside general construction and development.

"He said, 'What can I do to start my succession plan?' I think he looked at the K-12 division and said, 'This is easily identifiable. It's a portion that I could carve out to begin that plan, and also to offer something back to the employees,'" Sexton says.

Sexton says it was flattering to be chosen as president for the more than 60-plus employees of Campus Construction.

"I felt like he had the trust in me to put his name out there and have me carry on with this portion of it," Sexton says.

When Campus Construction separated from Christa in 2008, it represented roughly one-third of Christa's work force. The new company took with it a portfolio of 200 clients, 140 of whom are repeat customers, to start with a solid foundation.

The new position was the fruit of a long career Sexton had spent pursuing growth opportunities at some of the region's largest builders: at Pike Co. Inc., at Wilmorite Inc. and at Christa.

A start in engineering

Sexton started at John Luther & Sons Inc. as an on-site assistant project manager after studying civil engineering technology at SUNY College of Technology at Alfred.

He and his former roommate, Charles Craig, followed the same curriculum there. Craig says they have been friends ever since because they share a small-town background. Sexton gets along with everybody, and his optimistic attitude makes him someone other people want to be around, Craig says.

At home and at work, Sexton is the same person. "He is a pretty open guy."

Craig was best man 31 years ago at the wedding of Sexton and

his wife, Ann.

The men have been there for each other in good and bad times. When Craig went through a divorce, Sexton was by his side.

Sexton's wife says he has a lot of good friends, which perhaps more than anything is a testament to the type of man he is. He is energetic too, she adds, and that comes through at home, at work and in the community, where he serves on the board of directors of Camp Good Days and Special Times Inc. and the Finger Lakes Community College Foundation.

"He and the companies he has been affiliated at through the years, including Campus now, are very much involved in fundraising. He's heavily involved with Golisano Children's Hospital fundraising, among others," says friend and colleague John Dreste. "It's something he doesn't talk about too much."

Sexton, who grew up in Salamanca, Cattaraugus County, spent his first job assignment on site in the Southern Tier before being moved to Rochester.

Before joining Christa, he spent roughly five years at each company on his resume, rounding out his construction management experience by working on everything from hospitals to malls.

"At Wilmorite, Christa was actually doing work for me. That's how I got to know Dave," Sexton recalls. "I could see Dave was up and coming, and I could see it was an exciting company he had created."

Sexton asked Christa to contact him if an opportunity developed for him in the

company.

Ties to education

In 1994, Sexton started as a project manager at Christa, where his focus turned to schools—and has remained.

It seems almost fated that his specialty in construction eventually would be education. His family is full of teachers, including his wife, father, mother-in-law, sister-in-law and daughter.

Daughter Lauren, 27, teaches 11th-grade

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English in Bloomfield. His other daughter, Caitlin, 24, also teaches, but not in a school context. She works as a dietitian.

Though the emphasis on education in his own job is coincidental, he says, his family's perspectives inform his work.

"Especially when projects are beginning, he listens to what (teachers) want, not just what an architect perceives about how a room should look," Ann says. "He asks if (the design) is a practical way to teach what is taught in that room. 'It might look good, but is it really what you need?'"

Sexton says he enjoys every aspect of school construction: being out in the field to supervise the work, defining the scope of the project, communicating it and working with school districts to maximize the aid they get from the state.

"You're trying to create a project that voters will accept and support, and that in itself is not easy," Sexton says. "Part of it is minimizing what it's going to cost the local taxpayers and to maximize what the state is going to offer each district, because each district has a different building aid ratio."

At Christa Construction, Sexton and his team learned how to help schools understand the process of getting approval and analyzing the aid they would be entitled to, working alongside schools' financial advisers, architects and others. Campus Construction's job is to manage that process on behalf of the school and ensure that everyone is on the same page.

"We like to think we pull it all together," Sexton says. "There are so many dynamics. It makes it interesting in that regard, not to mention the personalities that are coming to the table."

What makes his job even more interesting and varied now is leading a company that is 100 percent employee-owned.

Along with a board of directors, Sexton steers a company with 60 employee-owners—half of whom he hired while at Chris-

ta. After a year and a half at Campus Construction, Sexton says, they are starting to connect to how their performance and input affect profits.

"It's kind of an interesting dynamic. We just gave our first statement to employees, so they have the realizations hit that their efforts, from every aspect of what we do—from administrative assistants to field managers, project managers on site—they have to not only keep our clients happy but help find work," Sexton says.

Recently, a committee convened to devise a mission statement for the new company. Project managers out in the field now are showing an interest in these types of decisions and joining the committees responsible for them.

"You do see a change in attitude," Sexton says.

"It is interesting and kind of fun to watch. I think the younger people coming up through our company not only see the value of that, they're going to make out tremendously. As long as we do the right things, they could end up all right. Then there are us old guys; maybe we'll get a piece of it," Sexton says, laughing.

New markets

Part of what the new company wants to do is expand beyond school construction into higher education and health care. That is why it chose the name Campus Construction Management, Sexton says. Simultaneously the firm is looking to expand beyond New York into Pennsylvania.

The company has yet to land a project outside its geographic and K-12 niche, but Campus Construction still is young, Sexton explains.

"We haven't gotten into health care and higher ed yet. We're attempting to. In fact, we have a proposal due for MCC next week. That's on our radar."

Redefining its reputation should not be that difficult, Sexton says, since the backgrounds of Campus Construction employees are as diverse as Sexton's own. Many employees have extensive experience on hospital and higher education projects.

But for now, K-12 work alone is keeping Campus Construction more than busy. It has just started a \$32 million job in the Honeoye Falls-Lima Central School District and a \$55 million project for the Churchville-Chili Central School District.

"Last year alone, after having just started, we put in place over \$200 million worth of school construction. This year looks good too," Sexton says. "We're tracking close to that."

Thomas Sexton

Title: President, Campus Construction Management Group Inc.

Age: 53

Education: Associate's degree in applied sciences in civil engineering technology, SUNY College of Technology at Alfred, 1977

Family: Wife Ann; daughters Lauren, 27, and Caitlin, 24

Residence: Fairport

Interests: Golf, fishing, hiking, scuba diving, snowshoeing

Quote: "When we sell our services and we talk about what we do, I think the first message that we send to our clients is that we become an extension of their staff, we represent their interests, and in doing so we pull this complex process together."

It's a strong period despite state budget woes. Schools are facing tighter budgets themselves as the types of projects available for aid are changing, and voters are more watchful.

"There is a concern, when you're cutting staff. Do you put a project out for referendum when the message is: 'We're cutting; we're struggling to maintain our educational programs. How do we put out a project to voters and have them support that, when we're going to raise taxes and potentially reduce our staff?'" Sexton says.

"We've been up against that for the last two years, and it could easily be two years more before we're out of that, depending

on how the funding goes."

On the plus side, school construction never stops entirely, Sexton says. The focus now, for example, is on safety and asset preservation, which the state requires schools to track carefully.

Schools, for example, are required to have five-year capital facilities plans to stay ahead of maintenance. One of Campus Management's services is establishing and maintaining those plans.

Services and projects will shift with the economy as it recovers. For the long term, however, the focus is on diversification and winning the same kind of name recognition in the hospital and higher-education

sectors that Christa had in the K-12 sector.

It is a matter of reapplying what workers already know to other types of buildings. Whatever the project, the goal is to serve the best interests of the customers so they will tell other prospective clients.

At Christa, the division grew by word of mouth; Campus Construction plans to do the same thing, once it gets a foot in the door. With its resume, Sexton says, the company will not have trouble.

"You couldn't ask for a better way to start a company," Sexton says. "It's exciting and a lot of fun."

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