

MRB Group president keeps firm focused on aiding small towns

By KEVIN OKLOBZIA

When Ryan Colvin looks to the future and maps out his firm's objectives for the quarter or the year, there is no dry-eraser board highlighting earnings projections that must be met.

As the president at MRB Group, he isn't issuing proclamations with dollar-sign demands.

"Our firm doesn't start off any year — and never has and never will — with revenue goals," Colvin said. "As we tell our employees, and we tell everybody, we don't want to focus on revenue and money."

"Instead, if we do a really good job for our clients, they will be with us for over 50 years, and if that works out, we will be a successful firm."

Such non-revenue-specific thinking isn't necessarily the norm in the business world. Especially for a firm that very much believes growth is essential for employee well-being.

But for MRB Group, an engineering, architecture and surveying company founded in Rochester in 1927, it's pretty much how its been doing business over the past 40 years.

That's because MRB Group isn't quite like the average agency of design professionals. Its engineers and architects aren't creating glass-marvel educational buildings. They're not turning abandoned downtown structures into posh luxury apartment towers.

They're instead devising long-range solutions to ensure a town's sewage treatment system works efficiently. They're implementing the most practical ways to upgrade the water system in a village. Oh, and they do create some very slick town halls.

In doing so, MRB has enjoyed significant organic growth, from 55 employees when Colvin became president in 2012, to 110 today — or nearly two dozen people larger than Colvin's 1990 graduating class at Clyde-Savannah High School.

MRB has found a niche, providing design and planning services to small municipal governments. The firm has spent the past four decades nurturing relationships with mayors, village administrators, clerks and treasurers across the state and also in Texas, and helping them fulfill community initiatives.

RYAN COLVIN

Position: President of MRB Group

Age: 48

Education: Bachelor's degree, civil engineering, Virginia Tech University, 1994

Residence: South Bristol

Family: Wife, Elizabeth

Activities: Golfing, boating, fishing, hunting, travel to warm-weather climates in the winter

Quote: "I've always believed in my own judgment, my own gut. If I make a decision, I stick it through because I believe if I made a decision, there's a reason I did it, and I will see it through to the end."



Photo by Kate Melton

Municipal engineer

"We have made small- to medium-sized municipal governments our pride and joy," Colvin said. "We represent village, town, city and county governments; we don't do much of any work for state or federal governments. We still do private-sector work, but the firm recognized that local municipal governments have a need."

That need involves planners and advisers and experts in land and water. Small municipalities don't have the funds for their own extensive staff of engineers. MRB Group fills the void.

"My first day on the job eight years ago, I was 'invited' to go to Avon to meet with the DEC (Department of Environmental Conservation) regarding a consent order for our waste-water treatment plant," said Don Northrup, village of Waterloo administrator. "The DEC said, 'This is what you need to do to fix the problem.' What a first day."

"But MRB helped us navigate a solution, get financing and designed the remedy. For me, they're near and dear. They were amazing."

From the headquarters in Rochester, and from offices in Syracuse, Saratoga Springs, Waterloo and Geneva, the firm provides services for more than 150 municipalities in New York as well as a few in Massachusetts, Connecticut and Pennsylvania. Employees in the Texas offices in Austin, Temple and Waco do work for more than 50 towns, cities, counties and utility districts in the Lone Star State.

"If you name a service a community needs, we do it," Colvin said. "Grant writing, geographical informational systems, we are significant in architecture (such as highway garages, town halls, village halls and libraries). Of course we continue to do civil engineering (water, waste water, roads).

"But we also recognized a significant need: municipal services. Doing neighborhood planning, strategic planning, asset-management planning, economic development planning. We have a municipal services division (called SmarterLocalGov, a trademarked name) that covers everything that we do for communities that's not architecture or engineering."

Communities appreciate the work and dedication.

"The large projects—you need that level of expertise," Northrup said. "We've had to rely on them a lot and we've never been sorry. In that niche of water and sewer infrastructure, they've been great for the village of Waterloo."

Specialization in municipal governments has been a wise business strategy for MRB Group. While an economic downturn can force private industry or the education sector to pull back on expansion or new builds, thus limiting project opportunities for design firms, life goes on in small-town America.

"Local governments will always need that work," Colvin said. "During a recession or bad times, governments can't just shut down, so the work is always there, the need is always there."

"There are firms around that do what we do, and do a good job at it. But a lot of those firms do other bigger and other things, like K-12 education, or very large private development. We are very much unique, since over 95 percent of our firm is dedicated to the municipal government sector. There are not many firms, especially in New York, like us."

That goes for their approach as being a bit blue-collar.

"We're not the three-piece-suit, Mercedes-driving firm," Colvin said. "We're never going to be that. We're a firm that recognizes that we're there to help communities that have economic constraints. As long as we do a good job and continue to add communities, we'll be around. We grow because we do the same thing we do and we don't try to be something we're not."

Colvin, 48, has been a part of the MRB Group rise for 25 years. He graduated from Virginia Tech University in 1994 with a degree in civil engineering and returned to Upstate New York to find a job.

"When I graduated, I knew I wanted to be in the Finger Lakes; I enjoy hunting and fishing," he said. "That's why I only looked for jobs around Rochester."

That admiration for the outdoors, as well as a nudge from a high school guidance counselor, is what led him to engineering. An aptitude test showed he should consider a vocation involving math or science.

"This was the late 1980s, and when you go to your guidance counselor in a small school, they're simplistically going to tell you — and I don't blame them at all because it worked out well for me — you're good at math and science, here's the jobs that would be really good for you," Colvin said. "When you're a guy in a small community and you love the outdoors, and you start looking at engineering disciplines, civil pops out because you can be outdoors. You can work roads, bridges, waste water. I said, 'OK, I'll be a civil engineer.' It was that simple."

He wasn't changing his mind, either. He rarely ever does.

"I've always believed in my own judgment, my own gut," he said. "If I make a decision, I stick it through because I believe if I made a decision, there's a reason I did it, and I will see it through to the end."

His desire to be outdoors as much as possible also led him to his home in South Bristol, just off Canandaigua Lake. If you want to find him on a weekend in July, check the golf course or the boats on the middle of the lake. He and his wife, Elizabeth, are either hitting golf balls on the fairway or lounging on the water.

"I tell people that in spring, summer and fall I feel like I live in a vacation spot," he said.

Colvin was hired by MRB in April of 1995. He has never worked for any other firm as an engineer. He started as junior engineer, moved to project manager, graduated to client manager and then in 2012 took over as president.

While the firm's succession plan had him taking the reins from James Gresens, the appointment to the top post came earlier than expected. Cancer claimed the life of Gresens in December 2011, forcing early implementation of the succession plan. Jim Oberst became chief operating officer while Colvin was named president.

"Clearly I wasn't intended to take over as president at age 39," Colvin said.

The firm has continued to thrive, though. Colvin handles the macro side of the business. Oberst, with strong people and time management skills, is the perfect leadership partner.

Colvin isn't really hands-on when it comes to

design anymore. His duties as president don't give him the time. And as he says, "Clearly I'm not the best engineer in our firm. We have some unbelievable engineers here. My strengths allowed me to put me in a position of president, just like everybody else's strengths puts them in a position to be successful here."

He still keeps in close contact with clients, however. When he finishes office duties in the morning, he'll often head to Livingston County or Orleans County or Seneca County, just to talk with a town clerk, a treasurer or an administrator.

Sometimes those trips take him to Avon. Colvin has been providing consulting and engineering advice to the village since he started at MRB Group.

"We are very proud of Ryan, knowing he started in the board room in the village of Avon," said Tom Freeman, the village mayor. "He's just been a superstar in our books for a long time."

"Boards change, people change but water systems, sewer systems, water treatment plants, they're always going to be here, and having that continuity and oversight (with the engineering firm) is so important."

Freeman appreciates MRB's approach to billing, too. There's no consulting-fee meter every time they talk.

"They don't charge us to sit in a board room or come to a meeting," Freeman said. "When the project starts, that's when they get paid."

That's in part because Colvin considers his firm their partner, not a one-and-done contractor.

"We pride ourselves on coming to them as not just as their consultant but their partner," Colvin said. "We're there to answer questions and provide them all the educated information so they can make the proper decisions."

And if a town, village or county has a unique need, MRB will find a way to accommodate.

"Our communities dictate the services we provide, because every time I hear a community say, 'We need help with this,' if we don't have it, I look to get it," Colvin said.

That's one reason the firm has grown.

"If you stayed as a 50-person firm, the people that are there, there's only so many places for them to grow professionally," he said. "The larger you get — the more offices you have, the more departments you have, the more disciplines you have — it offers up more places for people to advance. I want to make sure employees have a chance to grow both financially and professionally."

He also wants to ensure MRB Group has a bright future.

"We are a team; I'm just the current president in line," he said. "It's like a good coach. My job is to ensure when I leave the firm, it's in much better shape than when I took over and the next president has something to build from there. My role is not necessarily more important than any other person in the firm; every person's role is vital. Just because I'm president, it comes with certain things that I have to do, but I have duties just like everyone has duties."

"This has been my one and only job, and it will be my one and only job. It was my first job ever and I will be retiring here at some point."

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