

Divining profits from wetland expertise

Former Swiftmud executives lead engineering firm

BY CARL CRONAN
REAL ESTATE EDITOR

TAMPA — Many environmental engineers dread dealing with government agencies that can have a hard time accepting alternatives backed by science.

Pete Hubbell and Mark Farrell would be among those engineers, if they didn't have prior regulatory experience themselves.

The principals of Water Resource Associates Inc. formed their company nine years ago after extensive careers with the Southwest Florida Water Management District, commonly nicknamed Swiftmud. Hubbell was the agency's executive director for the last nine years of his 19-year tenure, while Farrell was assistant executive director for the latter half of his 14 years there.

Given the increased emphasis on preserving wetlands and conserving water supplies over the past decade of Florida's development boom, they decided to form their own private-sector firm to help clients meet the increased restrictions placed on projects by Swiftmud and other public entities.

"We know that (government) side very well, and coming to this side we were able to merge the public and private worlds," Hubbell said. He added that their prior experience with Swiftmud allows them to stay abreast of newer water use regulations and find new ways to meet them.

"We've got the ability to translate a lot of that to our clients," Hubbell said.

Farrell said the public-sector experience also allowed them to gain insight on how to operate the 15-employee firm more efficiently, particularly when it comes to managing people. "We're able to apply government scale to an independent business," he said.

During their years at Swiftmud, Hubbell and Farrell were credited with innovating water management strategies that were adopted statewide including long-range planning, permitting and development of alternative water supplies.

They have continued to find new ways around existing problems. Instead of spending \$80,000 to replace a wetland of little ecological value on the site of Canterbury High School in St. Petersburg, WRA convinced government officials to use private funding to restore a 23-acre, publicly owned wetland habitat in exchange for the 3.5 acres being impacted by the school's construction.

Hubbell said his and Farrell's Swiftmud experience gives them credibility in dealing with city and county leaders. Familiar-



KATHLEEN CABBLE

Water Resource Associates' principals Mark Farrell and Pete Hubbell spent many years in government service before starting their own company.



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ization with regulations is another plus, since they helped set many of those rules during their time at the agency.

"You create the picture for them, then you find a new way to meet the same objective," Hubbell said.

WRA's expertise has been tapped well beyond the Tampa Bay area, with the company being involved in eight different water supply planning projects throughout Florida.

"We've gone from being a local group to a statewide group," Hubbell said. As such, the

company's annual revenue has quadrupled over the past five years, with a 346-percent jump in just the last two, and he projects continued growth of 25 percent per year.

That growth also led the principals to buy their own larger building at Crown Point Professional Center on West Linebaugh Avenue near Dale Mabry Highway. WRA moved into the 4,500-square-foot office last April after outgrowing previously leased space, Hubbell said.

Rather than attempt to compete with larger engineering firms such as URS Corp. or PBS&J, Hubbell said WRA focuses specifically on water, whether it's divining new ground supplies or determining the best way to share finite supplies with growing areas.

"We provide those very specialized services that other small firms, and a lot of the big ones, don't have," he said.

Farrell noted that their firm has managed to remain profitable by sticking to its niche.

"We have won four of every five government projects we go for, and on the fifth we usually come in second," he said. "We're not trying to do all things for all people."

Because of their lengthy tenures at Swiftmud, Hubbell and Farrell built a large base of contacts with the Florida Department of Environmental Protection, the federal Environmental Protection Agency and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. They said they maintain those relationships and consult with the agencies often on various projects.

"Sometimes they bounce stuff off of us." Hubbell said.