

JBHM Architects still 'ready to go'

by Wally Northway

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JBHM of Jackson is helping to lead the way with Green architecture.

Firm preparing to celebrate its 40th anniversary

Next year, JBHM Architects will celebrate its 40th anniversary. The firm is still going over its celebration plans, but Richard McNeel, AIA, LEED AP, NCARB, IIDA, partner with the firm, said JBHM definitely is "ready to go" 40 more years and beyond.

"We're proud of what we've accomplished, and look forward to seeing many more milestones in the future," he said.

The roots of the full-service architectural firm go back to 1970 and founder Jim Johnson. The firm, then based in Tupelo, saw steady growth over the next 17 years, culminating in the opening of a second office in Columbus. A third "studio" office followed in 1990 in Jackson, and a fourth opened its doors in 2005 in Biloxi.

The firm's structure has played into what McNeel feels is the key to JBHM's success — personal relationships with clients and communities. The firm's offices operate as autonomous operations under one umbrella. This allows JBHM to stay close to clients and stay involved in communities while still taking advantage of the companywide resources.

To illustrate its philosophy of working close to home, JBHM Architects has executed projects as far away as West Virginia and Oregon. However, though the firm is licensed to practice in 20 states, almost all of its projects are found right here in the Magnolia State.

This community focus led JBHM to add a sister company in 2001 — JBHM Education Group. The company is not about buildings, but rather people. Looking for some way to give back, the JBHM Education Group is an educational consulting firm aimed at improving school performance. While it was envisioned as a way to return something to communities, it is certainly not a non-profit agency. Starting with Dr. Mike Walters and a two-person staff, JBHM Education Group today employs 300-plus staffers working in nine states, and the award-winning firm just landed a new client in Santa Fe, N.M.

In 2005, JBHM again showed its community-mindedness. In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, JBHM staffers began asking to relocate to the Mississippi Gulf Coast to help the region rebuild.

"How could we refuse that?" McNeel asked.

So, the firm opened the branch office in Biloxi. It took approximately 18 months for the firm to finally find a facility (the employees worked out of temporary locations in the interim), but today the Coast office is still doing working toward recovery.

JBHM Architects now employs more than 75 workers, and its annual revenues of \$14.8 million rank it 77th on The Mississippi 100.

The firm offers a diversified slate of services. These include architecture, planning, landscape architecture, interior design, graphic design and program management. It's portfolio is eclectic, and it has executed corporate, educational, housing, industrial, retail, justice, recreational, sports, religious, medical and historic preservation projects.

Recently, the firm's design work on the Hematology and Oncology Associates facility (a former grocery store) in Tupelo earned the American Institute of Architects/Mississippi prestigious Sambo Mockbee Award.

The firm has seen tough times over its history, and the current recession has hurt, stopping a significant amount of work. To offset the downturn, JBHM Architects has implemented cost-containment measures and has focused more on current services and markets it serves.

McNeel said this should hold his firm in good stead when the economy turns. He said JBHM Architects may look at spinning off new companies as it did with JBHM Education Group. However, he is adamant that the firm will continue to work as a big firm with small-firm appeal.

"My personal vision is that we would continue to strive to provide the best customer service and project management for our clients, so that when those times come for them to select their architect, their previous experience with us makes that decision a 'no-brainer,'" he said. "We are extremely grateful for the confidence and success that our customers have afforded us, but at the same time, we want to continue to offer very personal service and attention to detail. We have to make sure we don't lose sight of that, regardless of our size."

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