

Reinforcing Success

BY CHERYL MAH



Norm Streu is no stranger to the B.C. construction industry. As a construction lawyer, he has provided legal counsel to industry members for more than a decade. He has also served as the chair of the VRCA board and as a director of BCCA.

But since 2008, Streu has taken on a new challenge: managing the business of steel. The 38-year-old is the chief operating officer at LMS Reinforcing Steel Group, a leading rebar fabricator and installer in Western Canada.

“It was a new opportunity — a new challenge,” says Streu of his decision to join LMS. “The company impressed me as one that has done extremely well and it was a good fit on a personal level and skill set level.”

As COO, it’s his job to oversee the company’s risk management and operations management. He is also involved in business development in B.C., Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba.

“I get involved whenever we have legal issues. I review all our project contracts but

I would say 20 per cent or less of my time is legal,” says Streu, who usually travels once a week. “As a former lawyer, I don’t always have the technical know how but where I can assist is developing the processes that will lead to the most efficient production.”

Started in 1987 by founders and reinforcing ironworkers Ron McNeil and Ivan Harmatny, the Surrey based company has grown from a small pick up truck operation to being one of two major rebar contractors and fabricators in Western Canada.

“We are a customer service oriented company. We deliver what we promise,” says Streu. “As a result, a lot of our customers are repeat customers. We’ve built relationships with them and with the mills we deal with around the world and that has helped us through these tough times.”

Streu joined LMS in September 2008 and in many ways it was not great timing with the economic meltdown. But it was perfect timing to



Norm Streu is a well known figure in the B.C. construction industry.



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bring aboard his expertise in risk management and to review business operations.

“Over the last 18 months, we’ve been doing a lot of the work we should have been doing during the boom time to make LMS stronger as a company by improving processes and internal management,” says Streu.

Like many in the industry, LMS was impacted dramatically by the economic downturn. As one of the first trades in on a project, LMS felt the overall effects of the slowdown almost immediately.

“We started to feel it fairly early in 2008 and by the fall of 2008 it was pronounced and we had several major projects halted in the middle of construction,” recalls Streu.

To put that in perspective, before the slowdown, LMS was producing 7,000 tons of rebar a month with its Surrey yard running three shifts, 24 hours a day. Today it’s down to one shift. At peak, LMS had a workforce of more

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than 600. At least half have been laid off since the slowdown.

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“We believe we hit the bottom awhile ago,” says Streu about the outlook for 2010. “We’re seeing increased bidding opportunities. We’re

expecting by this summer we’ll be back to more normal levels of construction — substantially lower than the peak but back towards sustainable levels of activity.”

Prior to joining LMS, Streu spent nine years at Alexander Holburn Beaudin & Lang LLP leading the construction and engineering group.

Considering his background, construction law was a natural fit for Streu.

“I had a particular interest in construction law having grown up in a construction family. I’m actually a drywall tradesman,” says the father of two (five-year-old daughter Sasha and one-year-old son Jack).

His parents were German immigrants. His father was a drywaller and operated a small drywall contracting company in Victoria.

“I learned to drywall when I was 18 and I paid my way through school drywalling in the summer months,” says Streu, who was born in Edmonton and grew up in Victoria.



LMS has been involved in many recent major B.C. infrastructure projects including the Sea to Sky Highway.



Shangri-La is the tallest building in Vancouver.



Streu graduated with a BA honours from the University of Victoria in 1994. After obtaining his Juris Doctor degree from the University of Toronto in 1997, he returned to Vancouver where he articulated at the law firm of Swinton & Company (now Miller Thompson).

When he was called to the bar in 1998, he moved onto the firm now called Fasken Martineau where he began his career as a construction lawyer. He joined Alexander Holburn in 1999 where he would eventually spearhead a new construction group and lead six lawyers specializing in construction law.

LMS became one of Streu's clients in 2006. As he became more involved with the company, McNeil and Harmatny formally invited him to join their executive group. The move has been a rewarding one for Streu.

"Compared to practicing law, I find it more rewarding to pursue the success of your own business rather than advising other people on their businesses," he says, adding, "for example, over the next few years, I want to focus on LMS transforming from a B.C. player to a truly Western Canadian leader in the rebar supply and installation industry."

To reach that goal, the company is focusing on business development and growth, particularly in the provinces immediately east of B.C.

LMS recently opened a new and larger fabrication yard in Calgary. It sits on five acres and includes a 25,000 square foot enclosed

fabrication yard and new office space. Greg Hubbard, vice president of operations, heads up the Alberta office.

"We were a B.C. only company until about five years ago and then we started following some of our customers into Alberta," explains Streu. "Since then we've been more actively seeking to establish a stronger presence in the Alberta market."

LMS is working on its first infrastructure project in Winnipeg with Surespan Construction. The \$32 million SRTC tunnel project will serve as a transit tunnel for buses to better improve the city's existing system.

"The hope is to use this project to help expand into the Manitoba region," says Streu, adding LMS also owns its own trucking company.

Currently, LMS has approximately 20 projects underway in Alberta and 50 in B.C. Notable B.C. projects include the Hotel Georgia, Prince George Cancer Clinic, BC Place phase 2 and West Pender Place highrise. In Alberta, LMS is completing work on the Grand Prairie Aquatic Centre and working on Calgary's Bow Tower, which will be the tallest building in Western Canada.

"We do any size reinforcing steel project," says Streu. "Our traditional bread and butter was residential highrises. But we made a concerted effort to focus on developing our strength in infrastructure about five years ago. It was a key decision particularly since the market slowdown. It has put us in a stronger position now to be able to pick up infrastructure work."

So far, LMS has been involved in almost all the recent major B.C. infrastructure projects including the Sea to Sky Highway, Golden Ears Bridge and Coast Meridian Overpass.

An important part of the rebar business of course is buying steel at the best prices. LMS has a steel brokerage arm that focuses on steel trading.

"Our ability to get the best priced steel is a huge part of our competitive success," says Streu. "We buy a large quantity of our steel offshore but lately the best priced steel has been in North America."

Steel prices per pound have fallen almost by half since the peak of construction but have shown substantial increases recently.

"In the last couple of months, we've seen quite substantial increases over a short period of time. Whether that new pricing will hold is anyone's guess," says Streu. "No one thinks prices are going to jump all the way back up to what they were in boom times but the challenge is our customers want certainty in relation to prices but there are limitations to how far we can see ahead."

LMS is not only known for its professionalism and integrity, but also for its charitable contributions to the community. Their annual charity golf tournament has raised more than \$650,000 in 10 years for the Canucks Place Children's Hospice.

"We're very proud of our involvement in a variety of community groups, particularly with Canucks Place," says Streu. **CB**

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