

STIMULUS COULD PROVIDE LIFT Engineering firm sees good timing in move

Olsson Associates is moving into a bigger office — in a shrinking economy.

Company officials signed a lease two years ago to move from 72nd Street and Mercy Road to the new, nearby Aksarben Village, a mixed-use project northwest of 63rd and Center Streets.

The company was growing at the time, but because that growth slowed along with the economy, it now will only occupy one third of the space it's paying for.

Bad timing?

Not quite, company officials say. Friday's move might come at just the right time.

Olsson — which offers civil engineering, environmental sciences, landscape architecture and urban planning services — is one of the companies poised to benefit from President Barack Obama's stimulus plan, which calls for civic improvements such as roads and bridges.

"We're very bullish on the stimulus package," said Dave Ciaccio, national practice group leader for landscape architecture and urban planning. "It's about improving the quality of life for a whole community."

Olsson works on private and public developments, such as the creation of residential subdivisions, parks and downtown redevelopment.

Examples of Olsson's current projects:

- Preparing a new campus master plan for Boys Town;
- Testing materials for the baseball stadium under construction in north downtown;
- Providing consulting services to the

City of Omaha on its sewer-separation project.

John Olsson founded the company in 1956 in Lincoln as a small municipal firm primarily doing work or surrounding small towns.

It has grown to nearly 700 employees in 22 offices scattered mostly throughout the Midwest. Lincoln remains the headquarters, but the firm operates in cities from Tucson, Ariz., and Phoenix to Minneapolis and Denver.

The Omaha office opened downtown about 12 years ago with about three employees. It moved to the Travel and Transport building at 72nd Street and Mercy Road about nine years ago.

All 55 employees who work there will move Friday to a new building in Aksarben Village, a \$250 million to \$300 million mixed-use development on 70 acres once home to the Ak-SarBen horse-racing track.

About 25 employees who work at a Sarpy County office, at 114th Street and Giles Road in La Vista, will not move to the new office.

Olsson's Omaha office move marks another milestone for the urban village. Olsson is one of the first commercial businesses to open in the project.

Grubb & Ellis/Pacific Realty opened Monday in a new building at the northwest corner of 64th and Center Streets. Olsson will be the first tenant in a building at the southeast corner of 67th and Frances Streets.

"Bringing this firm there, with its youth and with its innovation, is going to be a great thing for Aksarben Village," said Ciaccio, who oversees the landscape architects and urban planners in all 22 Olsson offices. "It fits right in line with the progressive image of Olsson — we're an entrepreneurial group, we're creative thinkers. And we're really all about neighborhood and community." Lou Lamberty, Olsson's Omaha office leader, said Olsson also was attracted to Aksarben Village because of its proximity to the

Kiewit Institute, a University of Nebraska-Lincoln and University of Nebraska at Omaha partnership that educates engineering and information technology students.

Olsson hires interns from the institute as well as from the Scott Technology Center, just a quarter-mile from the Kiewit Institute campus.

Olsson officials also liked the idea of consolidating to one floor. Currently, employees are scattered on parts of two floors in three locations in the tower.

The company is leasing 18,000 square feet on the new building's second floor, taking up about two-thirds of the floor.

"It just makes internal communications so much easier when you can walk across the aisle and talk to one another," Lamberty said. "We're looking forward to being all together."

The new office also gives the employees more room.

Company officials signed an 11-year lease in 2007, when business was booming and they anticipated the company's rapid growth to continue. About a year ago, Olsson started to see business slow. While it has escaped layoffs, it has had "very few hires," Lamberty said.

Even so, paying for the unused office space is manageable and affordable, Lamberty said.

"I have no doubt that once the economy turns, we'll fill that fairly quickly. There's an enormous amount of work out there just waiting for people to have money again. We believe we are in very good shape for when the economy turns, and we will be taking off again."

Company officials already are planning strategically for that turnaround, pinpointing areas where they want the business to go, Ciaccio said. While that has helped them weather the tough economy, passage of the stimulus plan provided an extra boost.

Ciaccio said he is inspired to see a federal plan that emulates the Civilian Conservation Corps, the federal work relief program that built some of the nation's finest parks during the Great Depression.

The possibility that the stimulus could lead to his firm working on the next wave of civic improvements has him thinking of outdoor spaces — not unused office space.

"To think we can do those same things today . . .," he said. "All of a sudden, here's a way and some funding. There's even more reality, more money behind it."