

MSE's 30th birthday brings plans for expansion

By Leslie McCartney of The Montana Standard – 1/16/05

Just past its 30th birthday, MSE, one of Butte's larger employers, is celebrating by carrying out a mandate to substantially change the engineering firm.

"It's been tough, but in the end it will be very good," said general manager Jeff Ruffner of the changes at MSE. Some of those changes include analyzing the entire company's structure and ensuring that employees' skills match customers' needs, examining productivity, reaching for specialized certification and growing the company nationally. It also went through an early-retirement offering which leaves the company slimmed down to about 170 employees.

"The amount of change going on is really significant," MSE President Don Peoples said.

As part of the directive, MSE is increasing its presence by establishing new satellite offices all over the country, strategically placed where MSE already has customers or wants to curry more. During the last two years, MSE has staffed offices in Washington, North Carolina, South Carolina and West Virginia, with another office planned in Huntsville, Ala., and in San Diego by the end of this year. An office in Texas has also been proposed.

"For us, Butte is our home but we really have to look at where our market is," said Ruffner, who took over the manager job more than a year ago and embarked on an ambitious plan to remake the company according to the company directors' plan. The new satellite offices are tangible steps toward grabbing more work for the company and growing its bottom line. Currently, the offices being established are operated by Butte personnel who agreed to live and work in those states on temporary assignments. Andy Zdinak manages the Idaho Falls, Idaho, office, while Jeff LeFever heads up the Morgantown, W. Va., office. The field office in South Carolina is headed up by Dan Battleson and Dave Franklin is in North Carolina. In Washington, Barry Moravek, who recently joined MSE, is manager.

Eventually, permanent employees will be installed for the temporary Butte employees in those offices. The company firmly believes that the work netted at those sites will help the not only MSE, but Butte itself as the workforce increases to support the added work elsewhere.

In addition, Peoples has agreed to stay on with the company until 2006, a year past when he planned to retire, to oversee the process begun about a year and a half ago. The company's future is important to Peoples, who sees the company at twice its present size in the next 30 years. MSE may be a confusing company (see sidebar) to even the people of Butte, who have grown accustomed to its presence but may not understand its role. "We're much better known outside of Butte than in," Peoples commented.

At its most basic, Ruffner, says, MSE is an engineering company that offers technology solutions to specific problems. As such, it may work on projects for the federal energy, defense, EPA and aerospace projects. Much of MSE's work comes from federal clients and is paid for through the appropriations process on the federal level.

"We have been very successful at the appropriations process," Peoples commented, but added that none of the money would be forthcoming if the firm hadn't been accomplishing its tasks and keeping its clients very happy. "Nobody is going to go to bat for you if you don't do good work," he added. It is also important that the company stay Butte-based and continue its work in the community. In fact, the company rejected a few years ago an offer for its sale, preferring to chart its own course for the future, rather than relinquish control. Peoples credits MSE's strong and faithful board for steering the company toward the future.

Board members, who only receive travel costs and a small stipend to be on MSE's board, include Harp Cote, Jack Combo, Lindsay Norman, Milt Datsoupoulos, Bill Kebe, Buddy Beck, Maureen Fleming and Peoples.

In the past year, MSE has also spun off a lesser-known group, called the Center for Innovation Inc., which focuses on small business innovation work. Now in the business incubator in Uptown Butte, the company is a standalone company, independent of MSE, although MSE retains a minority interest in the business. A former employee of MSE, Rita Spear, also started her own woman-owned computer technology company with MSE's blessing and See CHANGE, Page D5 encouragement.

That company, Ingenium Data Technics, holds a contract to manage the Thornton building, which MSE owns, along with its flagship facility, the Mike Mansfield Advanced Technology Center, south of town in the Butte Industrial Park.

"We have worked in nearly every state in the U.S. and six foreign countries, but our headquarters will always be in Butte," said Peoples.