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## Midwest Mole tunnels into large local projects

East-side company in unusual niche makes mark

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In the face of a slumping local economy in the early 1980s, several national construction firms packed up and left Indianapolis. One locally based salesman, Len Liotti, was given a choice-move to St. Louis along with his job at tunneling contractor Affholder Inc., or set out on his own. Seeing the void the big players would create when leaving, Liotti started **Midwest Mole** Inc. in 1982 to fill it.

Twenty-five years later, the privately held firm is thriving thanks to some major local projects, including work at the new airport terminal. **Midwest Mole** also is winning national awards, sales revenue is increasing 10 percent to 15 percent per year, and the firm is primed to keep growing.

"We'll continue to do the smaller stuff, but we've ramped up to be able to go after the big projects," said President Dan Liotti, who took over when his father Len retired.

**Midwest Mole** has made its mark as the only local contractor that does "trenchless" digging, a site-preparation technique that allows builders to get underground piping-usually sewer and water lines-to their projects without tearing up roads and tangling with railroad owners along the way.

With the trenchless approach, companies usually dig a pit on one side of a road then drill horizontally under it to accommodate the piping.

**Midwest Mole** drills tunnels ranging from 20 inches to 14 feet in diameter. It's the largest trenchless digger in the state and regularly tackles projects throughout the region.

City and county governments are using the technology more often, generally paying a little more to keep roads open when they tackle sewer projects, for example. And they're requiring private developers to use the technology more.

Plus, deteriorating public infrastructure means **Midwest Mole** is drilling to reline and repair sewer lines, rebuild railroad culverts, and move infrastructure for road expansions.

With increasing demand, the firm has grown enough to go after large projects like the new terminal at Indianapolis International Airport. Airport leaders wanted an underground fueling system and a sewage system that could carry away the sludge created by de-icing planes-which required the installation of 2,000 feet of 8-1/2-foot-diameter steel pipe that ran beneath one runway and two taxiways. Locally based Bowen Engineering Corp. tapped **Midwest Mole** to help put together a bid for the project.

"We contact them for any type of underground work," said Bowen Project Manager Matt Maczka. "They do a safe job and they make us look good to our customers."

After months of planning, **Midwest Mole** brought in specialized equipment and battled boulders at the airport site. When the work wrapped up in May, it gained industry acclaim, including the 2007 Project of the Year award from trade magazine Trenchless Technology.

**Midwest Mole's** \$8 million payment for the airport work was spread over two years and helped boost the company's 2007 revenue to \$17 million. That's up from \$10.5 million in 2003. The firm, which started out with two crews, now has 16 crews and 80 employees, about half of which are full time.

Liotti hopes the airport project will be a launching pad to a bigger level of work.

"There's more work but also more competition nowadays," he said.

The firm is well known in the industry despite being only a "midsized" player, said Trenchless Technology Editor Jim Rush.

As **Midwest Mole** pushes to land ever larger projects, it will be starting with a firm local fan base.

"We use them exclusively," said Lora Brumett, project manager and estimator with Indianapolis-based Poindexter Excavating Inc. "They're union, they have high safety standards, and they never let us down."

Poindexter has used the company on school projects, commercial developments and even for some of the site work it's doing for the new Honda plant in Greensburg.

**Midwest Mole** also has been in talks with the Indiana Stadium and Convention Building Authority about how to build the pedestrian tunnel connecting the stadium and convention center expansion. Contracts for that portion of the project won't be released for bidding until next spring.

But no matter the size of the job, the challenges keep Liotti in the game. To prepare for a big project, the company reviews soil samples and analyzes boulder composition. At the end of the day, though, the workers never know what they'll encounter.

"There could be sand pockets or boulders," Dan Liotti said. "There's always a pit in my stomach-is this going to work the way we wanted?"

When it does, there's always the thrill of success.

"It's like they say with the railroad, once this business gets in your blood, it stays," he said.

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