

# Clark Patterson Lee in growth mode in Buffalo market



Photo credit: Haley Wehner, Clark Patterson Lee

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For Clark Patterson Lee, an architecture and engineering firm in Rochester, its debut project in Buffalo wasn't a high-profile office building or shopping center.

The first local jobs included New York State Thruway bridge inspections and landing an engineering contract with the Erie County Department of Public Works for portions of Milestrip Road in Orchard Park.

Not exactly headline-grabbing projects, but those jobs gave the firm the foothold it needed in the Buffalo Niagara marketplace.

"(The public works department) gave us a chance," said Jennifer Michniewicz, principal associate at Clark Patterson Lee. "It allowed us to be established as a 'Buffalo firm.'"

The local office opened in 2000 with 10 employees in leased space in Cambridge Square on Union Road in Cheektowaga.

Fast-forward 17 years and the company has nearly 40 employees who occupy 12,000 square feet on three floors in a Savarino Cos. building at 26 Mississippi St.

in the Cobblestone District.

The Buffalo office is one of the largest in a 12-office network across the Northeast and Southeast and is on pace to grow by 25 percent in the coming year. Vice President Michael Mistriner anticipates soon having 50 employees or more.

The local portfolio is diverse and includes high-profile projects such as the \$50 million National Comedy Museum in Jamestown that's due to open next year. The company also is involved in work totaling \$45 million for the Niagara Falls School District and Holiday Valley's new \$14 million main lodge.

"It's amazing to see where we started to where we are today," said Brian Kulpa, senior associate.

The firm's growth locally has been incremental, according to Mistriner and Michniewicz.

They said it wasn't one particular project that helped drive that growth but rather it was a combination of word-of-mouth and aggressive bidding when it came to public-sector projects.

"We really did grow from some very small beginnings," Mistriner said.

The diversity of services played a key role, Kulpa said.

Clark Patterson Lee offers not only traditional architecture and engineering services but a number of other functions including helping clients gain municipal approvals or deal with complex environmental issues.

"It is one of our hallmarks," Kulpa said. "If someone needs help, we can work with them and get them through whatever process awaits them."

Michniewicz said she sees a strong correlation between the firm's local growth and the region's economic resurgence.

Clark Patterson Lee relocated from Cheektowaga to Buffalo when the national economy began to tank in late 2008.

"Kind of an interesting time to do that but it worked out," Michniewicz said.

As the local and national economies rebounded, the firm's regional portfolio grew, lending credence to the adage that employment levels in architecture and engineering firms serve as a barometer of a region's economic development.

"It's safe to say that our growth aligned with what's going on in Buffalo," Mistriner

said. "There were a lot of opportunities out there."

When the Buffalo office relocated from Cheektowaga to the Cobblestone District in late 2008, the company had a goal of having at least 30 employees there within 10 years.

"We are right on track or actually ahead of it," Michniewicz said.

Many of the new hires were interns who came over from such places as the University at Buffalo or Erie Community College, which Michniewicz credited with turning out well-trained graduates.

"Hiring from there is a no-brainer and it helps keep young people in Buffalo," she said.

"It's interesting because so many of those students want to stay here and it wasn't all that long ago that (many) wanted to leave," she said.

Working collaboratively are employees in the 12 offices in New York state, North Carolina, Georgia and South Carolina.

Mistriner said there are times when the Buffalo office may have personnel working on an Atlanta project and vice versa.

"We do move expertise back and forth," Mistriner said. "It helps to know that."