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Hopes for Infrastructure Spending as 2021 Nears

W.T. BYLER WINS SPECIALTY CONTRACTOR OF THE YEAR

TOP SPECIALTY CONTRACTORS

A MANHATTAN ROAD & BRIDGE CO. CREW CONSTRUCTS A BRIDGE OVER RODNEY PARHAM ROAD IN LITTLE ROCK AS PART OF A \$91-MILLION EXPANSION OF I-630 FOR THE ARKANSAS DEPT. OF TRANSPORTATION.



PHOTO BY JAMES BOBO



W.T. Byler Builds Upon Varied Site Prep Services

Rail construction and a wealth of civil site skills in several sectors have paved the way to prosperity for the open-shop firm **BY JOHN GREGERSON**

BUILDING LOCAL
Houston-based and family-owned and operated, W.T. Byler is celebrating 47 years in business this year.

Houston-based civil sitework and railroad contractor W.T. Byler Co. has laid the groundwork to advance as one of the most formidable enterprises of its kind in Texas and southwestern Louisiana thanks to its diverse clientele, numerous site preparation services and a rigorous safety program. Revenue for the family-owned business, founded in 1974, rose nearly 70% to \$420.29 million in the past year alone.

The open-shop firm engages in 60 to 80 projects a year, according to Wendell Rychlik, executive director of business development and marketing for Byler. In addition to private design-build railroad projects, Byler's direct-hire workforce of up to 1,000 engages in a variety of services across numerous sectors, including clearing and grubbing, ground improvement earth surcharge, mass excavation and embankment, below-grade piping installation, in-situ and pulv-mixing soil stabilization. Construction of site struc-

tures encompasses building pads, site-work concrete, asphalt paving, heavy haul roads, laydown yards, brine ponds and dredge material placement areas.

The firm has built hundreds of miles of rail work, including turnkey construction of Class 1 main lines, storage-in-transit (SIT) yards, transload sidings, spurs and wye tracks, all executed among a variety of soil and environmental conditions. Byler also performs railroad maintenance-of-way and railroad emergency response.

Recent growth is primarily organic and representative of an ongoing upward trend, says Rychlik. As one measure of its progress, Byler recently purchased its 1,400th unit of earth-moving equipment. Included in the count are 85 25-ton Volvo articulated haulers, purportedly the largest fleet of its kind in the U.S. For purposes of quality control, Byler leverages advanced technology to enhance the performance of its equipment. Using 3D imagery originating from in-house

PHOTO COURTESY OF W.T. BYLER CO.

surveyors, highly skilled operators employ GPS bulldozers to cut to line and grade, Rychlik says.

Last year, the firm harnessed its resources to engage in concurrent sitework for 10 industrial-petrochemical plants in Texas for clients requesting anonymity in addition to sitework for three Houston-area projects: a Coca-Cola plant and distribution facilities for Dollar Tree and Medline. Rail-related work also is driving business, says Rychlik, who notes the firm currently is involved in 13 Class 1 regional projects for clients such as Union Pacific, BSNF and Kansas City Southern.

“Railroad construction has recently provided us good opportunities,” says Rick Johnson, vice president of operations with Byler. The activity has helped offset a softening in petrochemical and commercial sectors due to circumstances including the COVID-19 pandemic and market conditions, he says. Nevertheless, the firm continues to be buoyed by performing heavy and civil engineering construction for several project types, including ethane-cracker and fractionator facilities, distribution centers and public spaces—notably the Land Bridge and Prairie at Houston’s Memorial Park. Some of Byler’s more notable projects include Minute Maid Park, home to Major League Baseball’s Houston Astros, and NRG Stadium, home to the National Football League’s Houston Texans.

Byler’s diverse clientele resulted from efforts to counter downswings in core sectors, including rail, commercial and government, says Johnson. Petrochemical-related work proved profitable given ongoing demand for such products as pharmaceuticals, car parts, cosmetics and cleaning products, Rychlik adds. In all, industrial and petrochemical work currently account for 50% of firm revenue, railroad work for 25% and commercial and government work for 15% and 10%, respectively.

In addition to client diversity, the firm’s culture has also fostered growth. “Our culture is one of openness,” Rychlik says. “You’re family, not a number.”

“We recruit locally and tend to promote from within,” says Johnson. “We may start our machine operators on water and dump trucks and once they’ve gained some experience, move them to bulldozers and excavators. Fact is, substantial portions of our upper management and foremen started out with a shovel in their hands, knowing they eventually would have the potential to move up.”

In turn, “Employee retention and professional development are key to providing consistent project delivery for our clients,” says Rychlik. “Our craft retention program includes safety and performance incentives, competitive wages and benefits packages, and an open-door policy that promotes open communication and team collaboration. We have high tenure and modest turnover rates.”

In addition to a stable workforce, safety has proven key to securing contracts, says Geoff Pospisil, director



of safety and risk manager with Byler. To promote safe work conditions, new employees receive training in equipment-related operations, including controls and instrumentation, engine or motor operation, refueling and lube, steering and maneuvering, and excavating and loading. New recruits also receive site-related training involving surface conditions, load composition and stability, load maneuvering, pedestrian traffic, confined areas and sloped surfaces as well as material location hazards and overhead obstructions.

“We partner with our clients, and work doesn’t start until provisions for jobsite safety are in place,” Pospisil says. Accordingly, Byler develops a safety, security, health and environmental plan for every job, addressing a client’s project-specific criteria, as well as protocols to mitigate risks and ensure the health and safety of onsite personnel and visitors.

Of particular importance is eye contact, given that sitework frequently requires physical separation that precludes verbal communication, Pospisil notes. Eye contact between equipment operators and ground-based flaggers and spotters on the ground helps clarify matters. “Each day, we have our field workers repeat it three times—‘eye contact, eye contact, eye contact,’” says Pospisil. Operations include a daily job safety analysis among the work team as well as discussion and planning to mitigate hazards. Since August 2015, Byler crews have logged nearly 9 million work hours with zero lost-time accidents.

Among other accolades, Byler was recognized in 2011, 2014, 2016, 2017, 2019 and 2020 with the Associated Builders and Contractors (ABC) National Safety Award and also received ABC’s National Pinnacle Award in 2013. Likewise, Byler, an ABC Accredited Contractor, has won numerous safety citations from the Construction Users Roundtable.

Safety figures prominently in weekly meetings among executive management representing construction operations, field operations, heavy field work, railroad work, quality assurance and business development, among others. Meetings also entail discussion of new and existing clients, in addition to the status of current projects, including personnel, material and equipment requirements, Rychlik says.

In general, Byler’s 12 project managers are engaged in jobs from their inception, from bidding to schedul-

ON THE RAILS
W.T. Byler Co. builds to line and grade at Union Pacific’s Englewood Yard in Houston.

“Employee retention and professional development are key to providing consistent project delivery for our clients.”

—Wendell Rychlik,
Executive Director
of Business
Development and
Marketing,
W.T. Byler Co.

READY TO ROLL

W.T. Byler has a large late-model fleet of equipment totaling more than 650, plus rolling stock and small equipment.



ON THE WEB

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ing and estimating. Once construction begins, project managers transition to field operations, overseeing the work of the firm's 45 project superintendents and 15 foremen, says Johnson. Projects are supported further by nearly 40 survey technicians, 35 mechanics, 22 fuel and lube technicians, 350 heavy equipment operators and 200 track builders, among others.

A rigorous maintenance and service program keeps equipment in peak condition. About 10 mechanics operate in the field during construction, Johnson says. The remaining 25 mechanics service equipment in the shop until a job is complete, he notes.

Johnson estimates repeat business at about 65%. The firm also continually seeks out new clientele such as

Salt Lake City-based Savage, a provider of engineering, procurement, construction and operations for transportation, logistics, materials handling and industrial projects. On the basis of site preparation work Byler performed for a 400-acre rail loop track Savage is undertaking in Portland, Texas. The two firms are collaborating on additional projects, says Shayne Andersen, vice president of engineering and construction with Savage. "From a reliability standpoint, Byler's equipment is second to none, due to the care they put into its upkeep," says Andersen. "We also like the fact the firm dedicates its equipment to a single project site."

Equipment reliability is matched by the proficiency of "dedicated operators operating dedicated machines," Andersen notes. "From a productivity standpoint, Byler also excels in planning and sequencing its work. All in all, the firm is very trustworthy."

"We're committed to our clients' safety, schedule, costs and quality requirements," says Jeremy Perkins, Byler's vice president of business operations. "If you meet those, chances are the client is going to contact you for his next project. We are definitely dedicated to hands-on management, but also investment in our employees. It's all about the right people, the right plan, the right equipment and the right execution of the plan." ■

PHOTO COURTESY OF W.T. BYLER CO.

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47

Years

1973 - 2020

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- Underground Piping Systems
- Soil Stabilization
- Asphalt Paving
- Turnkey Railroad Construction

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2020

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