

FINANCE & COMMERCE

New electrical division paying off for local business

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By BRIAN JOHNSON



LouAnne Berg started the electrical division of her company two years ago when the economy was in the tank. This week, J&L Steel & Electrical Services landed its biggest electrical project to date. (File photo: Bill Klotz)

LouAnne Berg has good reason to see a bright future for her company's two-year-old electrical division.

Berg's company, Hudson, Wis.-based J&L Steel & Electrical Services, announced its selection Thursday as the electrical contractor for the state of Wisconsin's \$20 million Chippewa Falls Veterans Home.

The \$2.2 million electrical work for the 80,000-square-foot skilled nursing building is the company's biggest electrical job to date. Put another way, the value is about \$200,000 more than Berg expected to do for the entire year in her electrical division.

In a phone interview, Berg, the chief executive officer, said her company is basically being treated as a prime contractor for the project, which means it is dealing directly with the state of Wisconsin.

Not a bad piece of work for a company that is still considered somewhat of a newbie in electrical work.

The company was founded 32 years ago but worked almost exclusively as an installer of structural and reinforcing steel until January 2009, when Berg flipped the on switch for her new electrical services division.

The economy was in the dumps, but she said at the time that she wanted to move ahead with the new division because quality workers were available and she hoped to be in a good position to grow when the economy bounced back.

Looking ahead, she hopes to land more electrical work in Minnesota - where her company has its roots - and partner with other contractors on large state, local and county projects.

Although women contractors are getting a foothold in the industry, it is still "fairly unusual" to see a woman-owned electrical contracting firm, said Judy Rubin, president of the Minnesota Electrical Association.

"On the contractor side, it surprises me a bit that there are not more women in it," she said.

While electrical services are still relatively new to J&L, the company has a seasoned electrical staff. In 2009, Berg hired a master electrician and two veteran electrical workers with combined experience of more than 60 years.

The division currently has four people doing bidding, estimating or project management, in addition to regular office staff members who handle accounting for both the electrical and steel divisions, Berg said.

The 72-bed Chippewa Falls Veterans Home will be paid for with a combination of state and federal money: 65 percent from the federal government and the rest from state of Wisconsin-issued general obligation bonds, according to a project summary from the Wisconsin Department of Veterans Affairs.

Construction will begin this spring, with completion by November 2012.