

October 28, 2008 4:22 PM CDT

J&L Steel Erectors enjoys whirlwind year

by [Brian Johnson](#) Staff Writer



J&L Steel Erectors' fast, efficient rebar work helped bring the 35W bridge project in on time. Left to right: Ron Berg – senior estimator, Mike Reger – project manager, Luanne Reger – CEO, Bennie Berg – project manager. (Photo: Bill Klotz)

Hudson-based firm was a contractor on 35W bridge, among others

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LouAnne Reger appears relaxed and happy these days, and why not? She's enjoying a new office, visits from VIPs, and – despite the struggling economy – more than enough work to keep her company busy.

Her company, J&L Steel Erectors, is coming off a whirlwind year in which it was chosen to supply rebar for the new 35W bridge – the largest project in the company's 30-year history. In June, when the project was still in full swing, J&L moved to spacious new headquarters in Hudson, Wis.

The paint hardly had time to dry on the walls in its new digs at the Towerview Business Center when J&L was chosen to host a presidential campaign visit by Sen. John McCain; the event attracted 800 visitors and national media.

In February, the company garnered a contract to install reinforcement steel and post-tensioning materials on the east-bound Interstate 494 Wakota bridge over the Mississippi River. More recently, it landed a job for the new Highway 23 bridge in St. Cloud.

The McCain event was a big deal – “I think they were very happy with it,” Reger said – and the Wakota and St. Cloud bridges are significant jobs.

But they pale in comparison to the \$234 million 35W bridge project, which was completed last month after a mere 10 months of construction.



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“There will be nothing like this again. Every other job will seem like, ‘Oh, we can do that. That one is easy,’” said Reger, who started the company with her then-husband in the 1970s and continued as sole owner after the couple divorced in 1996.

The 35W bridge project was so important to J&L Steel Erectors, in fact, that the company keeps a giant mural of the bridge under construction prominently displayed in its front office.

It's a fitting tribute to a project that generated more than \$11.6 million in revenue for the company, including a \$1.47 million “incentive” for the aggressive project

schedule.

Working on a project team led by Colorado-based Flatiron Construction, J&L installed more than 13.2 million pounds of rebar and contributed 132,896 man-hours of labor to the project, nearly twice as much as its normal man-hour output for an entire year.

Up to 160 union ironworkers were on the site at any given time. On average, each ironworker took in more than \$122,000 in gross wages for the project.

"This is the J&L stimulus package," Reger said with a laugh.

"It was an amazing project," she added. "What they did in that amount of time – we installed 13,222,640 pounds of rebar. It's just unbelievable to think that could have happened in that time frame.

Originally, Dec. 24 was the deadline and even at that point it was, 'How are they ever going to do that?'

In fact, as Reger points out, the work couldn't have been completed so quickly without major contributions from metro area companies like hers. While much attention has focused on Colorado-based Flatiron's selection to lead the project team, dozens of local contractors also chipped in.

Most of 35W bridge workers were local

Top local subcontractors, besides J&L, included St. Paul-based Carl Bolander and Sons (\$4.1 million subcontracted), Minneapolis-based Meyer Contracting (\$5.1 million), Roseville-based Case Foundation (\$6.49 million), and St. Michael-based PCI (\$3.58 million), according to a summary of "first tier" subs supplied by the Minnesota Department of Transportation.

Other local names on the first-tier list include Precision Testing (\$1.6 million), Polyphase Electric Co. (\$1.99 million), Rainbow Inc. (\$968,000) and Engineering and Construction Innovations (\$735,875).

Cemstone, a Mendota Heights-based provider of high performance concrete, said the bridge was the highest-profile project in its 81-year history. The company says it supplied more than 60,000 cubic yards of high performance concrete for the bridge, including 120 precast concrete segments.

Eighty percent of the bridge work force was local, according to Minnesota Department of Transportation spokesman Kevin Gutknecht. On top of that was the economic impact of food, fuel and other purchases made in connection with the work, he noted in an e-mail.

Peter Sanderson, project manager for Flatiron Construction, said he's pleased with the local contractors' performance.

"Ten percent to 11 percent of the work was done by minority subcontractors, and we are happy with the work they did," he said.

Reger's company, a certified woman-owned business, was part of that group.

"It wasn't just all money that went out of state," Reger said. "Even though we are in Wisconsin, we are still a Minnesota corporation. We file Minnesota corporate tax, and our employees – 99.5 percent are in Minnesota.

"There was a lot of money that went to local contractors, local subcontractors, local suppliers, trades people that were making a ton of money – taking it home and getting it back into the economy."