

TRIANGLE BUSINESS JOURNAL

Executive Voice: Taking the Southeast lead at Kimley-Horn

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Stemming from humble Raleigh roots that date back to the 1960s, Kimley-Horn, a planning and design engineering consulting firm, has seen its growth explode. The firm is now in 27 states and keeps its headquarters in Raleigh.

The Southeast remains a key market for Kimley-Horn, and its regional leadership is now in the hands of Neil Deans. A civil engineering graduate from N.C. State University, Deans assumes new responsibilities at a company long known for a collaborative and positive culture. And it's a thriving company on the financial side, with *Forbes* estimating 2017 revenue at \$722 million.

When did you join Kimley-Horn? I joined Kimley-Horn on a part-time basis before I graduated from college in October 1993, with the hope that I could convince the firm to hire me full-time upon graduation. Fortunately for me, they did.

What opportunities do you see ahead in your new role? I see an opportunity to fuel growth by adding new practices as well as emboldening our existing practices. I see a need to be bold in setting an overall atmosphere of opportunity for our staff. There's an opportunity to capture the drive of the next generation of engineers, planners and scientists as we grow into a firm that still adheres to our culture, but is their firm and reflects their passions.

What areas of your business in the Southeast in particular are growing?



TAYLOR MCDONALD

Neil Deans, an N.C. State University graduate, looks to retain Kimley-Horn's employee-friendly culture.

We have a strong balance of private- and public-sector clients, which is unique in the industry for firms of our size. From a private-sector standpoint, our practice builders are seeing continued growth in land development throughout the region. From a public-sector perspective, infrastructure is very much in the conversation. I participated in the North Carolina General Assembly's Blue Ribbon Commission on infrastructure in early 2017. The commission heard from multiple constituencies where infrastructure was a primary concern – both the need for new infrastructure and the need for ongoing maintenance and upgrade of existing infrastructure.

What Kimley-Horn projects are you particularly proud of and why? The Raleigh City Plaza design is a project that we see every day as the view from our downtown Raleigh headquarters, but it was also a catalytic project to activity in downtown. The Wake County Transit Plan is another great project because of its magnitude and the positive impact it will have on the area once complete. Our team developed a plan for enhanced transit in Wake County. The plan includes four Bus Rapid Transit corridors in Wake County, commuter rail across the region, and a dramatic increase in high-frequency transit. ...

The Capital Boulevard Bridge Replace-

TRIANGLE BUSINESS JOURNAL

ments north of downtown Raleigh (with NCDOT) is a project that resolves issues with structurally deficient bridges on Capital Boulevard at the Peace Street and Wade Avenue interchanges – but at the same time we were able to successfully integrate public involvement.

We've worked on the North Carolina Museum of Art expansion and with the city of Raleigh on the Moore Square project to enhance public spaces in our community.

How is the conversation about infrastructure impacting Kimley-Horn's business? I feel that the conversation around infrastructure has been there for a while, but the drumbeat is a bit louder now. However, regardless of the conversation, the ability to fund infrastructure is just as important. We are fortunate to be at a point in the economy where the need and the funding can intersect.

We are seeing an increase in spending in coastal areas on projects that will improve resiliency to flooding and other storm impacts over the coming years. In some states, we are seeing increased investment in transportation and water projects.

What do you see when it comes to recruiting engineers? We've seen an increase in recruiting competition over the last few years as markets have improved. That, coupled with relatively flat enrollment within some engineering majors such as civil, has tightened the market even more. To remain competitive at a time when the need for top talent is abundant, we've seen and answered the need to get in front of students early. Most often this involves presentations and events with undergraduates instead of waiting to meet them in their junior or senior year. We've also promoted STEM locally as early as grade school.

What does Kimley-Horn do to attract women and minorities? We've addressed the increasing gender diversity in our industry through our LIFT (Lasting Impact

For Tomorrow) initiative, which provides women with targeted development programs and family-focused tools that address their specific needs, and we focus on diversity topics in many of our employee-training sessions. We can see the results in our past recognitions as one of Fortune's 100 Best Workplaces for Women and 50 Best Workplaces for Diversity, which are based on anonymous survey responses.

You are an avid cyclist – why? While living in Florida, Louie, a good friend who worked with me wheeled a dusty, dry-rotted, mid-1980s Trek road bike into my office. He found it under the office stairwell and swore it had been there for years and never touched. It was ugly. I had been talking with Louie about my lost love for bikes and he walked in with the bike and said, "Time to get you into road cycling." He laid a custom paint job on it for me and we replaced anything rubber. We named it "The Troll" because it had lived under the stairs for so long. I was 28 years old, and I was hooked.

Why does Kimley-Horn regularly rank among the national leaders in best places to work? Our firm's core purpose is "to provide an environment for our people to flourish." For me, that just about summarizes it.

What can you do as market leader to help sustain that? Maintain the transparency that Kimley-Horn's leadership team is known for. There's not a lot of red tape at Kimley-Horn, and our transparent leadership approach directly contributes to the family-like feel you'll hear employees talk about.

What advice do you have for other companies? The advice I try to live by is three-fold. First, promote a culture of trust: build it, earn it and invest in it. Second, communicate openly – it enhances trust and eliminates confusion. And third, empower your staff. We are at our best when people are influencing their own future.

Was there a moment that stood out after you were promoted? Every January we hold a regional, in-person kick-off meeting. 2018 was my first year as the regional leader, and although it had a similar stage, format and energy as other years, it felt different. I noticed a sea of faces in a different way than I had before. I saw someone who just started their career, a first-time parent, mothers and fathers, a new senior practice builder and senior partners who are nearing retirement. In that moment, my responsibility became even more clear.

What trends are you seeing among young engineers? We're seeing trends related to generational passions. For example, a lot of collegiate programs related to water have become popular among students who see water as a global issue to tackle.

What have you read that made an impact? I read the book "Emotional Intelligence" by Daniel Goleman very early in my career. Working in a very technical industry, I found the concepts of the book intriguing and universally applicable. Regardless of your profession, understanding yourself and others is invaluable.

Did you have a key mentor? Jack Bagby – one of Kimley-Horn's first employees, now retired – lived the key components when it came to helping employees thrive: he extended trust, established open communication and empowered people.

Do you have anything special on your desk? A little over a year ago, I decided to learn the banjo. Most days, you will find banjo picks on my desk. I often keep a small banjo in the office, and when I have five minutes between obligations I try to recharge (as quietly as possible) by practicing. Learning to play reminds me daily that you just can't rush some things, but it is rewarding to see incremental improvements. In our world of immediate gratification, it is a great reminder that some things just take time.