

Ekistics designs golf courses, entire cities

Rob LeBlanc says land planners are in demand around the globe

By CLARE MELLOR
Business Reporter

Designing a new city in northern Libya for two million people seems a daunting task, but Rob LeBlanc doesn't seem fazed by it.

"It's a massive, massive project," the landscape architect says of the resort city he is planning on the Mediterranean coast.

"It details where houses are going to go, the industrial parks, airports, office buildings."

Landscape architects, who specialize in large scale land planning and design, are in demand around the globe, says LeBlanc, who launched his company, Ekistics Planning & Design of Dartmouth, about 12 years ago.

That demand spurred LeBlanc, 41, to start a separate company, Land Inc., about 18 months ago; it focuses solely on international projects. That company, which shares an office with Ekistics, is designing golf courses, resorts and even entire cities in countries such as China, Egypt and Morocco.

Co-owner Patrick Morello, LeBlanc's old university classmate, operates Land Inc.'s Toronto office. The company also has offices in Vancouver and California.

"We are doing a waterfront project (in Tanzania) so I'm off there in a couple of weeks. It's a fair amount of travel," says LeBlanc, a married father of three.

"It's a tough balancing act," he says of work and family.

After completing a biochemistry degree at Dalhousie University, LeBlanc switched gears and did environmental planning at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design. He then did a graduate degree in landscape architecture at the University of Guelph.

He knew from the start that land planning was his thing. "And I still love it today," says LeBlanc, who has come to work casually dressed in jeans and a checked shirt.

LeBlanc started Ekistics out of the back of his father's old carpet-cleaning business in Burnside Park. "I didn't have a nickel starting off. Dad loaned



Rob LeBlanc, owner and president of Ekistics Planning and Design, left, confers with Aspogogan Developments president Barry Publicover on what will be the 8th hole fairway on the 550-acre Aspogogan Ridge golf course and development under construction near Mill Cove. The first nine holes are due to open in 2010 and the project includes nearly 300 residential units. (TIM KROCHAK / STAFF)

me five grand to buy a computer and a printer."

Within a week, LeBlanc had landed a \$100,000 contract, but it would be some time before he would see a paycheck. For months he juggled carpets and his clients at the Chem-Dry warehouse, which his father has since sold.

At the same time, in the back of the Chem-Dry, younger brother Paul started his company, Extreme Group, a marketing and public relations firm with offices in Halifax and Toronto.

"Paul and I used to have to carry carpets into the back. That was our room and board. I can remember doing a golf course for a client and somebody came in. I heard, 'Rob, give me a hand' and I had to go and help get carpets in the middle of a meeting."

Ekistics, which is still LeBlanc's main business, is now housed in a building that LeBlanc built about four years ago near Dartmouth's old Starr

Manufacturing site. LeBlanc's father, Roger, now operates his business, Apple Courier, out of the same building. His mother, Betty, does Ekistics' books and works in the office a few days a week.

Ekistics, which employs 17 people, has about 50 active projects in the Atlantic region.

"I'm sure if I wanted to I could just do (international work) full time... but it is stressful on people to be travelling all the time and also I just think it is important to stay rooted," LeBlanc says.

Ekistics has just finished the design plan for Halifax's Point Pleasant Park, with Montreal firm NIP Paysage, and it is expected to be made public in a few weeks. It has also just wrapped up long-range plans for Dartmouth's main street and the campus of Mount Saint Vincent University.

The Aspogogan Ridge golf course and residences in Hubbards, a plan for downtown New Glasgow and water-

front plans in Surrey, P.E.I., and Saint John, N.B., are a few of its current projects.

Along with Ekistics, LeBlanc owns Robert LeBlanc & Associates Golf, which does golf-course and resort planning and Form Media, which does signage and interpretative materials for business and government agencies. The three businesses come under flagship Form Design Consultants.

Landscape architects must see every site in person because there is a great deal that a map won't reveal. They also frequently hold workshops to figure out what vision people have for a place, LeBlanc says.

"You never sort of parachute in an idea. You have to be on the ground to figure out what everyone is hoping to achieve. Sometimes it is hard to get it out of them, to find out what their vision is."

"A lot of times people don't know

what they want, and part of (our job) is to facilitate a community in understanding what their long-term goals are."

Paul LeBlanc calls his older brother "absolutely brilliant" and absorbed in the craft of his business.

"A perfectionist," he says.

Paul, four years younger, says he and his brother are close, regularly getting together socially or to toss around business ideas. He says they have different business styles. Paul knows all his company's financial figures without taking a look at the books but says Rob doesn't. On the other hand, Rob knows every detail of every single project his company is working on.

Paul says his older brother has always been adept with the latest technology and versed in the latest computer software, and he really "leaned on him" when they were both starting their businesses in the carpet warehouse.

"I probably drove him crazy... I would ask him questions about 25 times a day," Paul says.

Ekistics has grown mainly through word of mouth, says LeBlanc. There's no shortage of projects, as "there are not a whole lot of people who do what we do." He has seen sales grow by about 150 per cent every year.

LeBlanc's goal is to double his staff at Ekistics in the next five or six years and spin off more companies. "A civil and environmental engineering branch is sort of a natural spinoff."

Despite the demands of business and family, he still finds time to play in the band Skully, which regularly performs in pubs around the Maritimes. LeBlanc, who plays bass and sings, has been in bands for some time; that's how he paid for 10 years of university without getting a student loan.

"That was my first entrepreneurship experience."

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