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## Harford Co. engineering firm growing across mid-Atlantic

BY JAMES MOSHER

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Versatility can take you a long way. Just look at **Geo-Technology Associates, Inc.**

The company has survived the departure of its four founders, weathered at least two recessions and yet it is still growing at an impressive clip during its 20th year in business.

Nimble thinking and valuable services have enabled Geo-Technology to keep its customer list growing.

"We're a very service-oriented company," said Mark Grande, who joined GTA in 1988 and became its president six years ago. "We get things done for our clients on time. We have great technical people that save them money."

The company has a policy of returning a phone call the same day it's received, said founding partner John L. Wirth. The level of repeat business is around 90 percent as a result, according to Grande.

"Customers want to move fast," said Wirth, who hired Grande and other senior managers and still consults with GTA on occasion. "When it comes to developing a piece of property, people are usually in a hurry. GTA is well aware of this."

GTA has grown from a one-person office in Bel Air run by Wirth to more than 200 workers with offices in five states. The company, whose clients include attorneys, construction firms and land-use companies, is adding environmental cleanup management to its roster of services that includes environmental



FILE PHOTO

Geo-Technology Associates, Inc.'s president, Mark Grande, above, said that sales have been growing at a 30 percent annual clip in recent years.

consultation, geotechnical engineering, and construction observation and testing services. The environmental expansion, to begin this fall, is customer driven.

"It's something that our clients have wanted us to get into for some time," Grande said. "I think it will provide a lot of growth opportunity for us."

In addition to customer demand, the right personnel have to be in place before

GTA tackles a new market, the president said. The company employs geotechnical, environmental and materials engineers as well as geologists, environmental scientists, drillers and engineering technicians. The hiring of two key executives enabled the environmental services expansion to proceed, Grande said.

That policy goes for opening new offices as well. GTA is looking for the "right kind" of environmental engineers to open and manage offices in southern Maryland, southern New Jersey, North Carolina's Research Triangle Park, and two locations in Virginia. A goal is to open one or two new offices each year. The most recent opening was in York, Pa. in April.

Besides Maryland, GTA has offices in Delaware, New Jersey, Pennsylvania and Virginia. The corporate office, where approximately 35 people work, is in Abingdon.

Opening an office in the Waldorf area is currently the company's top priority, Grande said. GTA does about half of its business in Maryland and that business continues to grow although Grande called its quarters in Abingdon, Laurel and Towson "mature offices."

According to Grande, the company is profitable, although he declined to give a figure. Revenue is expected to rise between 5 percent and 10 percent although that will likely be topped, Grande said.

"We plan on 5 percent to 10 percent, but we've been seeing 30 percent for the past couple of years," he said.

The company has been doubling in size every three to five years since the late 1990s, Grande said.

Another ingredient in the growth story has been a business model formulated by Richard Morris. Morris was one of the founding shareholders along with John Wirth, Thomas O'Laughlin and Kirk Ritchie. Wirth, who left the company in 1999, started GTA as an offshoot of **Morris & Ritchie** Associates, Inc. GTA still works with and shares office space in Maryland, Delaware, and Pennsylvania with Morris & Ritchie, which was started about five years before GTA.

Combined, GTA and Morris & Ritchie make up one of the largest consulting engineering firms in the mid-Atlantic region. The pair market themselves as a "one-stop shop" for jobs that involve engineering, architecture, planning, surveying, environmental consulting,

landscape architecture, and construction observation and testing.

GTA has done several jobs in Baltimore City's Inner Harbor East as well as at golf

**GTA is working on the project to build a hotel replica of the Camden Yards warehouse next to the Ripken Baseball complex in Aberdeen.**

courses such as Mountain Branch, Beechtree and Bulle Rock. It is working

on two projects in Aberdeen which Grande classified as "challenging."

One involves the design of a facility at the Aberdeen Proving Grounds that will enable the armed forces to test vehicles and infantry using a wave machine. The other calls for GTA to improve the quality of the ground so it will support construction of a hotel on conventional spread footings at the Ripken Baseball complex, home to the professional minor-league Aberdeen Ironbirds team and the Cal Ripken World Series for 12-year-olds. The hotel will be a replica of the world-famous Camden Yards Warehouse that sits behind Oriole Park in Baltimore.

"It's quite an assignment," Grande said. "The work is interesting but the most interesting thing to contemplate is those little leaguers trying to hit the ball over that warehouse."

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