

Design firm TAG grows quickly after partners buy company

BY A.J. MISTRETTA | STAFF WRITER

A trio of design veterans has taken the helm of TAG International LLP and directed their attention toward growing the Austin company's local profile.

Ron Pope, Bruce Jackson and David Carson — all longtime partners with the architecture and land development services firm — recently bought out TAG's majority owner and senior partner, Mike Comer, who retired.

The ownership transition began six months ago, and since then the team has made a series of operational changes — particularly in how decisions are made — that have produced a dramatic increase in the bottom line. Several new clients, including aircraft components giant Rockwell Collins Inc., have been added to the roster in recent months. Revenue year-to-date for 2007 is already 20 percent over the annual total for 2006; the partners anticipate that 2007 will end up being a banner year for the company, with earnings the highest since the last peak in 2001.

"We very quickly set out to retool the way some of our operations were handled, and noticed immediate results," Pope says.

Launched in the mid-1970s as The Shiftlet Group, the company later became The Austin Group Architects before assuming the name TAG International during another ownership change in 1998. The 15-employee firm provides architectural design and land development services for national and international clients including Black & Decker, Maytag, Frito Lay, Trammell Crow Co. and Hines Interests.

The expansion of the CFAN Co. headquarters in San Marcos and a new Round Rock office building being constructed for Keywinn Rexroat Development are just a couple of the company's current projects in Central Texas. In Mexico City, TAG is



BRETT BUCHANAN/ ABJ

Ron Pope (pictured) and longtime partners Bruce Jackson and David Carson have spent the past six months making changes at TAG International.

managing a 2 million-square-foot industrial development project for ING Clarion.

Pope says the change in ownership presents new opportunities for TAG, including a renewed concentration on local work in five key areas: industrial, biotech, health care, commercial office/retail and government. In recent years the company has built a diverse client base throughout the United States and into Mexico, opening an office on the border in McAllen in 1991 and a Mexico office in 1999. While that national and international work will continue, Pope says TAG intends to raise its local profile by increasing participation in charitable, community and business-oriented organizations and events. For instance, the firm recently designed a cat adoption center for the Austin Humane Society, largely on a pro-bono basis.

"This is an exciting time for Austin, and

we think there are a lot of great opportunities here in our local market," says Pope.

At the moment, TAG is looking to bring on another three employees and could grow its staff to about 20 by the middle of next year.

Mark Few, executive vice president of American Bank of Texas, says he's used TAG to design the half-dozen new branches the bank has opened in Central Texas in the last four years.

"We don't have a cookie-cutter model for new branches," says Few. "We want the branches to reflect their surrounding community, and we've charged TAG to think outside the box for us." He says the design firm has consistently performed above expectations, offering viable solutions to key concerns in a timely manner. "They've become an integral partner in our expansion."