

Molding a business ** Bethlehem company uses precast concrete for efficient building.

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There's nothing pretentious about Tom Engelman and his Bethlehem Precast company.

The plant, nearly 40 years old, sits in a dusty property on E. North Street in Bethlehem, with large pieces of preformed concrete waiting to be shipped.

It's a subsidiary of Engelman Construction of Macungie, a family-run company headed by engineer Alphonse Engelman, father of Tom Engelman, the 47-year-old president of Bethlehem Precast.

The privately held company doesn't disclose sales or earnings.

Engelman and his crew of 37 people work at Bethlehem Precast within earshot of the old Bethlehem Steel plant on the city's South Side, though there's little left to hear, now that many of the buildings have been demolished and the plant is closed.

"We used to hear all the noise from making steel," Engelman said recently. "Then we'd hear large booms, when they'd be blowing up one of the buildings. Now, we hear nothing."

Bethlehem Precast, founded in 1980, is no longer overshadowed by the steel company. In fact, Precast's glory extends far outside Bethlehem.

It has used precast concrete for auditoriums at York and Penridge high schools, and at Bethlehem's East Hills Middle School.

Bernard Soluta is a civil engineer from the Philippines who was hired by Bethlehem Precast as an estimator/project manager. He said construction is speedier when using precast concrete.

"It took two months to put in 40 rows of seats -- from engineering to finish at East Hills Middle School," he said. "You can't get much faster than that."

Bethlehem Precast also has won contracts at some renowned sites in Philadelphia, including the Eagles' Nova-Care rehab facility and the 350-seat star-shaped Kimmel Theater in the National Constitution Center.

"The savings come because we cast the concrete before placing it into the building," Engelman said. "When it's cast in place, it takes longer. That wait can cost extra.

"The difference in time can be two days for precast and three weeks for cast-in-place concrete."

Because precast is made at the factory and dropped into place, it takes less time to install -- usually making the process cheaper.

The National Constitution Center, which opened on July 4 last year, required 85,000 square feet of limestone, 2.6 million pounds of steel and a half-million cubic feet of concrete.

Turner Construction of Philadelphia, the project's general manager, invited Bethlehem Precast to bid, and it won.

"Bethlehem Precast did a great job," said Chris Auer, project manager for Turner Construction. "The job was so unique. It wasn't something a typical precaster would even look at.

"It wasn't a huge project, but it was difficult. It was something that a smaller, more custom company could put together.

"It was one of the first finished pieces of work in the building, being hoisted and dropped down into its spot. After that, people could go in and sit in the seats even though little else was finished."

Engelman said creating the curved elements for the amphitheater at the National Constitution Center was unusual for his company, but he took on the challenge because the project was historic.

At the start, the amphitheater was specified for cast-in-place concrete, but the need for a speedy construction and a more aesthetic look led project owners and engineers to go for precast.

Engelman said his precast concrete gave the amphitheater a quick start. His company hired an erector to install the pieces and weld them into place in two days.

He said a construction crew using cast-in-place concrete would have taken two days just to complete one of the five levels.

Building center stage at the Kimmel Center may be one of the most visible jobs performed by Bethlehem Precast. But the company hinges its reputation with precast steps and cellar doors.

It also makes retaining walls, erosion-control systems and bridges for pedestrians and vehicles.

With the construction economy booming, Engelman said sales of the basement entrances are 45 percent above a year ago.

"We're the No. 1 dealer of basement entrances in New Jersey, eastern Pennsylvania, Delaware and Maryland," Engelman said. "We've sold 1,600 entrances to basements -- the complete unit. The builder leaves a hole, and we place the product there."

Company: Bethlehem Precast

What it does: Makes custom precast concrete products, basement entrances, steps.

Employees: 37

Year started: 1980

Biggest success: Made precast concrete seating for the circular theater at the National Constitution Center in Philadelphia.

Ambitions: To continue to grow with additional large projects.

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