

# A proper sense of design



Photo by Kate Melton

## Utica native rises through ranks at LaBella Associates to become chief operating officer

By **KEVIN OKLOBZIJA**

**F**or a good four years, starting in 1999, Steve Metzger spent the majority of his workweeks bringing to fruition the terminal building at the Port of Rochester.

As vice president and director of civil engineering for LaBella Associates, Metzger was overseeing the multitude of geotechnical, environmental and infrastructure challenges during design and construction of the fast ferry terminal.

So when the project was finished and the massive boat was finally set to arrive in Rochester on April 27, 2004, Metzger wanted to be there.

The terminal building wasn't his, nor was the ship, but Metzger felt a great sense of pride in completing the project for the City of Rochester.

"I took my son (Pat, a third-grader) out of school (in Victor), put a hard hat on him and we went out and watched the ferry come in," he recalled.

And then, just like that, the party ended. By January of 2006, after 20 months of never-ending financial issues, regulatory obstacles and comedic scorn by critics, the fast ferry was no more. Rochester had a beautiful terminal and no boat to use it.

"It was sad because we worked so hard to make it happen," Metzger said. "People would say, 'It's too bad about your project.' I'd tell them, 'No, no, our project was fine. The ferry failed.'"

Failure certainly isn't on the summary of work for LaBella, the Rochester-based design professionals organization that has doubled in size in five years and has gone from one location in downtown Rochester to 16 locales across the Northeast and North Carolina since 2010.

Failure also isn't on Metzger's resume. Since joining the firm on Nov. 1, 1994, the 53-year-old Utica native has put his stamp on a vast array of projects, though the general public would never know. Most aren't seen.

### Steve Metzger

**Title:** Chief operating officer at LaBella Associates

**Age:** 53

**Home:** Victor

**Family:** Wife, Jenny Champeau; son, Patrick 22; daughter, Kate, 16

**Education:** B.A. in mathematics from SUNY Potsdam, B.S. in civil engineering from the University at Buffalo

**Hobbies:** Long bike rides while listening to audio books, family time and traveling with his wife

**Quote:** "Think of opportunities. Put down the phone and get out in the community."

Such is life for a civil engineer. Designing drainage paths and sewage systems isn't sexy. Turning what was the pavement of a parking lot for the terminal into boat slips in the repurposed Port of Rochester Marina in the post-ferry era doesn't come with much fanfare.

"You're always a little jealous of the architects, because some of our best work (as civil engineers) is buried underground," Metzger said with a smile.

An employer recognizes, however. That's why Metzger now holds the title of chief operating officer at LaBella, a promotion announced in November. He had been executive vice president.

And to think this isn't quite what the Metzger family envisioned in 1982 when he received his diploma from John F. Kennedy High School in Utica and headed for SUNY Potsdam.

Construction was a way of life for the Metzgers, ever since Fred Metzger started building houses in the Mohawk Valley a century or more ago.

Fred W. Metzger & Son was a mainstay in Utica during the previous century. Had Steve continued the family tradition, it would have been a fourth generation of Metzgers involved in the contracting business.

But he found a different calling. He was drawn to engineering through his mechanical aptitude and desire to help his community.

"My dad (Paul) was happy for me when I made the decision to come to Rochester," he said, "but part of him was sad, too."

Metzger actually did work for a general contractor in Rochester following graduation from SUNY Potsdam in

1986 but then went back to school, earning a degree in civil engineering from the University at Buffalo in 1994. He was employed by LaBella before the year ended.

"I had always envisioned working in the construction business," he said, "but instead of working on things other people designed, I wanted to pursue a career in design."

That construction background enhanced his resume during the interview process at LaBella. Another candidate for the entry level engineering position had classroom knowledge but no real practical experience.

"He was a cut above people coming out of school, and he was very poised and confident in his abilities," said Mike Schaffron, a vice president at LaBella and one of the people who interviewed Metzger more than two decades ago.

Except Schaffron didn't really let Metzger know he was the leader in the interview clubhouse right away. The company did a little stalling.

"We always wait to the last minute to hire because we want to make sure we have the workload," Schaffron said. "So we invited him in for three or four interviews. Looking back at it, I feel a little bad that we had that many interviews."

Metzger's first projects at LaBella dealt with water mains, water treatment and water storage. Then came

erations in 2018. Metzger is now in his 24th year with the company.

"Around every corner there's been an opportunity provided and that has kept me invigorated," Metzger said.

In his new position, it's Metzger's responsibility to maintain that culture, where opportunity is provided the staff. He also is guiding advances in technology — project managers will still unroll blueprints at the work site but they'll do so with a tablet in one hand — while continuing to eye locations for company growth.

"We need to provide the technological resources to our staff so they can do their jobs," he said. "We're trying to do more inner-office collaboration between our professionals. It sounds easy, but with offices in different states we need to ensure the free flow of ideas."

LaBella Associates has added nearly 350 employees in five years, with a total workforce of just under 700 now. The firm has an office in Ohio, one in Pennsylvania, six in North Carolina and eight in New York.

And the expansion will continue if Metzger is successful in his role as COO.

"We don't see anything that will prevent us from growing the way we have the past seven years," he said.

As a result of recent expansion, LaBella now has a multifaceted look.

**"We have a small construction company that we started in 2010 that does environmental work. ... It's outside the box but it makes sense for us."**

the ferry terminal and a whole lot more along the way in terms of projects and responsibility.

That's a hallmark of LaBella. If you're committed to what you do and who you do it with, you'll advance.

"We're relationship-based and we want to provide growth for our people," Metzger said. "We're always thinking about training your successor. That prepares people to move into new roles and it creates a sense of excitement because there's growth."

"In our business it's important to be agile. You don't want to be trapped in small thinking. 'I went to school for this so this is all I can do.' We're not limiting ourselves."

Metzger himself is proof. He said there has never been a reason to look beyond the walls of LaBella's office at 300 State St. LaBella will celebrate its 40th year of op-

"We don't have all our eggs in one geographic basket and we're hiring people not just from an architecture or engineering background," Metzger said. "We're hiring people in procurement. We're hiring people in scheduling. In this day and age, it's about providing clients with solutions."

"We have a small construction company that we started in 2010 that does environmental work, digging up bad soil and cleaning up. It's outside the box but it makes sense for us."

Giving Metzger the title of COO obviously made a lot of sense, too.

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