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Bremerton firm is key part of city's re-birth

By ERIC D. WILLIAMS
Kitsap Sun

BREMERTON — A suggestion from a friend led budding architect Steve Rice to start his career in Bremerton.

"I think if there was a good architect over here, the community would use it," the friend told Rice.

"And we found that to be true."

So began Bremerton-based architects Rice Fergus Miller. Started as a one-man operation in 1987 by Rice, the company quickly expanded to four employees, with David Fergus joining as a partner in 1990. The architectural firm soon outgrew its couple hundred square feet of office space on the penthouse floor of the Fourth Street building downtown.

Leaving the cramped confines, the two partners moved across the street to a building owned by longtime downtown property owners Bremer Trust.

They eventually bought the 7,200-square-foot building, and founder Rice, along with partners David Fergus and Mike Miller have steadily grown the business over the years, reaching a high of 25 employees. The company includes 19 architects, three interior designers and three administrative staff.

The firm has played an important role in the redevelopment of downtown Bremerton.





Since 2002, Rice Fergus Miller has experienced a 56 percent increase in staff size, from 16 to 25 people, and a 79 percent increase in net operating revenue.

"I'm really proud of Rice Fergus Miller," Bremerton Mayor Cary Bozeman said. "They are the only architectural firm in downtown Bremerton. They hung in there during tough times and now they are seeing the benefit of that."

Like the town it calls home, Rice Fergus Miller's status has grown since downtown redevelopment took off. Rice says the company plans to stay true to its roots, and is looking for a larger facility in downtown Bremerton to relocate, accommodating the growth they expect. Rice said he wouldn't be surprised if the company doubled to 50 employees in the next 10 years.

"There are practical considerations for being down here," Fergus said. "But I think the biggest thing is we like the downtown area. If you're running an architectural practice that's where you should be. We don't want to be in the outlying areas."

The firm's business is centered around fire and emergency services, senior living, health care and community facilities.

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Mike Miller, a friend of Rice's since their college days at the University of Washington, joined the company as a partner in 2002. Miller lived in Bremerton and

wanted to stop commuting to Seattle, where he worked for one of the largest architectural firms in the country, NBBJ.

Rice said Miller helped diversify the firm's experience. The company has grown because it has little turnover, and employees find it attractive because it offers similar opportunities to Seattle architectural firms in a more laid-back setting, Rice said.

"We've benefited from people who do not want to commute to Seattle who want to work in an architectural practice," Miller said. "And there are frankly a lot of architects that are very happy to be working close to home."

Rice Fergus Miller's homegrown projects include the CenCom 911 Center, the Kitsap County Courthouse renovation and Poulsbo Fire Department Station 77.

In Bremerton, Rice Fergus Miller designed the city's new downtown fire station, winning a bronze medal from Fire Chief Magazine in a national competition for its design and functionality.

Miller said functionality in design remains a priority for the company.

"A lot of architects hold out the design of their building as what they do," Miller said. "But if we fail on the operational side, if the thing doesn't really function as it's supposed to do and it costs our client money, we sort of failed in our responsibility."

The company also is designing what Rice considers the crown jewel of his company's contribution to downtown redevelopment — the new corporate headquarters of Kitsap Credit Union. A \$12 million project being built across the street from the Kitsap Conference Center complex, the new credit union headquarters is scheduled for completion next summer 2006.

Future projects include building expansion for Olympic College; the Firs II assisted-living facility — the first Westpark redevelopment project; long-range planning for Harrison Medical Center; and Timbers Ridge, a \$60 million planned retirement community in Issaquah that when built out will be one of the largest retirement communities in the state.

Rice said the firm wants to continue to be involved in Bremerton's rebirth, and would like to see a mesh of old and new buildings stay as the downtown core evolves.

"The leadership here recognizes us, and generally cares about what we think," Rice said. "I don't know that you find that when you're working in a larger city. We feel like the city has given us an opportunity to help them vision what the downtown can be like."

Added Fergus: "Kitsap County is certainly getting a lot more attention and a lot more visibility throughout the whole Puget Sound region. I think what's happening in Bremerton and what's happening in Kitsap County is making waves, so to speak. It's impressive."

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