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This Virginia Beach firm is helping power the data center boom

By Kimberly Pierceall Staff writer Apr 4, 2019



L. Todd Spencer/Staff Buy Now Margaret Shaia, chief executive officer of Acoustical Sheetmetal, is seen in March 2019 inside one of three buildings on the company's Virginia Beach campus where they build fuel platforms and metal housing for industrial generators. Shaia and two other investors bought Acoustical Sheetmetal earlier this year. Business has been booming thanks to data center growth across the country.

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As data centers quickly gobble up large swaths of land across Virginia and elsewhere, it's meant one thing in particular for Virginia Beach-based Acoustical Sheetmetal: more orders.

The company, in business for 25 years, has been welding metal walls together to enclose essential backup power. The structures are sound-proof, weather-proof and sit atop fuel tanks the company also constructs, ensuring all that data stays safe.

"Business is just booming right now," said Margaret Shaia, CEO and part-owner of the company.

Dieter Steinhoff, who once had his own steel office the size of a ranch house moved in the dead of night via closed roads to the company's current campus, started Acoustical Sheetmetal in 1994 after he moved from Germany, running it with his wife Petra Snowden until both wished to retire. On Jan. 31, the couple quietly sold it to Shaia and two other investors involved in Young Capital Partners LLC and RTK Family Capital LLC after being assured the buyers intended to run the business rather than sell it again.

Near Naval Air Station Oceana in Virginia Beach and inside one of three buildings on the company's well-manicured five-and-a-half-acre campus, complete with an elaborate model train track built by Steinhoff, the bright sparks from welding equipment are a near constant as a team of people work with aluminum and steel to build structures that are sometimes double-wide, triple-wide and even quadruple-wide.

Inside, the structures generally aren't empty husks but can be pre-fitted with lights and fire suppression systems installed by the company. It makes climate-controlled control rooms, too, making the generator user-friendly for the end-user. Most are ordered by two customers, Cummins and Alban Cat, a mid-Atlantic dealer selling Caterpillar construction and power generation equipment.

"I was looking for my next adventure," said Shaia (pronounced SHY-uh). Most recently general manager of Flexicell, a maker of automated packaging equipment, Shaia had been a chief financial officer for two prior manufacturing operations including AMF Bakery Systems which makes industrial baking equipment.

RTK also owns Richmond Electric Supply Co., an electrical distributor based in Richmond.

Shaia said she and her fellow investors liked that it was a made-to-order manufacturing environment that was already run well but had the opportunity to expand.

It hasn't all been boom times, though. Tariffs have been "pretty costly," not only because of the physical price increase but also delays in getting needed supplies because of demand. But Shaia said she has faith the additional costs will eventually subside.

The new owners come on board as Northern Virginia has already been long-labeled "data center alley" and sprawling server farms continue to pop up, much of the square footage belonging to Amazon Web Services. Just in Loudoun County, there's 13.5 million square feet of data centers and another 4.5 million square feet planned, according to the county's economic development agency. Other users needing large generators include hospitals, hotels and municipalities.

The rise in demand poses a challenge though. With nowhere to physically grow at the moment, how can they build more? Shaia said they are looking at how to make the process more efficient, including contemplating tasks that could be automated. She doesn't expect robotics to come at the expense of jobs, though. The company employs about 100 people. Welders already work 12 hours a day, six days a week. She said automation will be a tool to help the existing skilled workforce.

"How do we make this job easier for these guys," she said, referring to the company's welders who work lengthy shifts and often have to contort into uncomfortable positions to reach a certain spot.

"I've never worked with such a hardworking and dedicated group of people in my career."

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