

Flourishing in Florida

RIPA & ASSOCIATES HAS BEEN ABLE TO RIDE OUT A STORMY SOUTHERN MARKET. BY JAMIE MORGAN

Chris LaFace, president of RIPA & Associates, credits the company's hardworking employees for its ranking as one of the top-10 regional contractors by *Gulf Coast Business Review*. "We have a great group of employees," LaFace says. "This award is the result of us over the past four and five years getting some of the best people out there. Some of them were the victims of layoffs or companies closing and we were able to bring them on, which has helped us sustain through this period. There is still work going on and we solidify our reputation by having great people."

Construction work has been hard to come by, especially in places like Florida, which is where the Tampa contractor is based. As a site and utility contractor, the 14-year-old company founded by Frank Ripa has been able to weather the storm through its diversity since its line of work lends itself to a number of fields.

"Whether it's a hospital, subdivisions or roadways, for us all the sites are more or less similar in scope," LaFace explains. "If you're going into a piece of land, clearing, moving dirt and installing the various utilities, it doesn't really matter what the final product will be since the site needs to be prepared for all types of construction."

Instead, what matters are the people, LaFace stresses, and the type of people who have brought the company this far are getting harder to come by.

"There's a preconception out there that there are a lot of people sitting at home, in the construction industry at least," LaFace says. "That's not entirely true. Most people haven't sat around for three years waiting for a job. Many have moved on to different states or career paths. In our trade, it's starting to get tougher to find those good, qualified people unlike before. We've got over 220 employees and have a great group of people, so our strategy is to keep attrition as low as possible and bring people up in the company to help create our own workforce."

That strategy has reaped dividends as RIPA consistently wins contracts in an inconsistent market. It has even been able to expand its footprint during this tough time. "Back five or six years ago, we predominantly worked in two counties because there was enough work to sustain us in those counties," LaFace says. "Now, we are in nine counties in central Florida, and we've gotten even more comfortable traveling, and when other people in those newer markets for RIPA see our quality of work we get a little traction that way."

The Repeat Work Route

Most recently, RIPA broke ground on St. Joseph's South Hospital in Riverview, Fla., making this project number two with that hospital. The client is building a 325,000-square-foot acute care hospital with an attached 85,800-square-foot medical office building and a detached 40,000-square-foot physician's office building. The 71-acre project also includes off-site road improvement to surrounding streets.



» Founder and CEO Frank Ripa (left) and President Chris LaFace are proud to work for repeat clients and ensure RIPA & Associates' work remains consistent.



RIPA was selected by the hospital and general contracting firm Barton Marlow to perform earthwork, including clearing, grubbing, strip site, site excavation, building pad construction and final grading. Other work includes base and paving work, which encompasses two asphalt lifts, a crushed concrete base, curbs, sidewalks, signage and striping. RIPA also is installing storm drainage distribution, sanitary sewer, water and fire systems.

RIPA began work at St. Joseph's South Hospital in June 2012 and will complete its work in approximately two years. As it makes headway on this project, it will also keep itself busy with a number of other projects such as the Lithia, Fla.-based FishHawk community being developed by Newland Communities.

"We've been working at the Starling at FishHawk residential development for over two years," LaFace says of the Hillsborough County neighborhood being developed by

RIPA & Associates
 www.ripatampa.com
 • Headquarters: Tampa, Fla.
 • Employees: 220
 • Specialty: Site and utility contracting
 "We want every customer to feel they are the No. 1 client."
 -Chris LaFace, president

Newland Communities. "Our service remains the same on each and every project for them."

One of RIPA's recent projects at Starling at FishHawk was a \$7 million contract to perform earthwork, including clearing, grubbing and erosion control for a 522-lot single-family sub-

division with a full amenity center, tennis courts and six parks. Its scope of work also includes installing a sanitary sewer collection system, water distribution system, reclaimed water distribution system and roadway construction and drainage. RIPA will wrap up its work on this phase in August 2012.

Because this is one of many phases RIPA has worked on for this development, the contractor is familiar with the land, client and the expectations, making them an ideal team member on this accelerated project. However, LaFace says it makes sure to treat each job like it could be a make-or-break opportunity.

"We don't cut corners," he says. "Our people would rather do a job slower and the right way than quicker and the wrong way. That is a company philosophy that I share and impress on everybody else. Our emphasis is on customer service. We want every customer to feel they are the No. 1 client and that is our goal." ♦

'There is still work and we solidify our reputation by having great people.'

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