



L o R: Lindsay Bailey, Marty McLeod, Lance Woods and Chad Bryant

Anyone who has spent more time in Houston County than it takes to zip in and grab a burger from the drive-thru has most likely realized that this county is currently experiencing some explosive growth. Such growth can be good or bad, depending on how well or poorly it is managed and directed. Left unchecked, unrestricted growth can lead to traffic problems, unsightly urban sprawl and the disappearance of the county's natural beauty and resources. Greenspaces are valuable, not only for aesthetic reasons, but they also help improve air and water quality while providing space for recreation and a home for wildlife.

So when a tight-knit group of family and friends decided they wanted to return home to Houston County to start their own business, they saw an opportunity not just to make a profit, but also to make a difference in their community. Ocmulgee Site & Environmental Services, Inc., one of Perry's newer businesses, is doing its part to try to minimize the impact of that growth on our natural environment amongst increasing residential and commercial construction.

Ocmulgee, lead by president Lance Woods, vice presidents Chad Bryant and Marty McLeod and annexation and zoning specialist Lindsay Bailey, just celebrated its one-year anniversary and is a big proponent of conservation subdivisions. In simplest terms, the idea of conservation subdivisions is to let the land itself dictate the planning of the subdivision to be built upon it, rather than letting the plan dictate how the land must be reshaped to fit the plan of the subdivision. "You cluster the houses on the suitable lands," explains Bailey. "You use the land to be the footprint of the development."

The surveying, engineering, consulting and planning firm feels conservation subdivisions are the best way to help developers get the most return from their investment and residents receive the most from their homeowners' experience. It does this by minimizing the impact to greenspaces and environmentally sensitive areas, which are just now beginning to be valued for the pristine accents and sanctuaries that they are. The firm has already helped get a conservation subdivision ordinance adopted by the City of Perry.

The idea is one Bryant first became acquainted with while he was working in Atlanta. He had moved to Gwinnett County

with the specific intention of learning from those leading the way in his craft. "All the regulations they have up there are moving this way, and I wanted to get a head start," he says. While there, he studied under Kevin Ringo at Ringo Abernathy & Associates. "[Kevin] is really gifted in doing layouts of subdivisions," says Bryant. "He always taught that a good design always starts with the layout."

Not raised a city boy, Bryant says he never wanted to move to Atlanta, but felt it was in the best interest of his career to do so. "I'm glad I did. It was a good experience," he says. "They are the pioneers up there. Everybody is taking their lead."

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When he and Woods, Ocmulgee's two founders, decided to make their idea of starting their own business a reality, Houston County was the natural place to be – not only because it was home, but also because it was where the action was. "People in Atlanta thought I was out of my mind. They thought I was crazy to come to Perry to do engineering. Now they're down here trying to get work," Bryant says with a hint of pride in his voice.

Conservation subdivisions benefit the environment by helping to reduce erosion because land is not clear cut, which leaves no vegetation to anchor the soil. The preserved vegetation also acts as a filter, improving water quality. Conservation subdivisions benefit homeowners because that same vegetation becomes natural buffers and barriers, creating a feeling of more privacy and space, even though homes are usually more closely spaced than in more traditional developments.

Utilizing the natural features of the property not only saves trees, but also makes the property cheaper to develop. "For every tree the developer knocks down, it costs him time and money," says Woods. But prior to the idea of conservation subdivisions, clear-cutting was the only way the developer had to get the subdivision he wanted.

"You don't have to cut down every tree to make a nice subdivision," says Woods. "A lot of plans I've seen in the past clear-cut the property." The end result is an open field leaving nothing but open space between

homes. "Conservation subdivisions leave something there that's natural. Most of the places where we leave trees are places where trees are supposed to be growing anyway, like bottoms or washes," he says.

Developers get to maximize the return on their investment and the future homeowners get a guarantee their scenery will be preserved. "Homeowners get the assurance that the trees will be protected forever and no one will build in their backyard. They get a feeling of space on their property," says Bryant.

Walking trails, parks and sports fields can all be incorporated into a conservation subdivision, improving its appeal without

increasing its environmental impact. "This allows developers to provide things to keep kids off the streets, which are sometimes the only places to throw a football or play baseball in a traditional development," says Bryant.

With all of these benefits, conservation subdivisions seem to offer the best solution not only for developers, but also for homeowners and environmentalists. So why aren't more developers building them? "They're just in a rut, taking the rubber stamp approach," says McLeod. The Ocmulgee team, with a modern and forward-thinking mindset that is backed by knowledge and experience, hopes to increase the development of conservation subdivisions in Houston County by educating developers about them and explaining the benefits.

"In Avington Glenn, a big drain went through the project. It was all wetlands. You can put lots in wetlands, but we put all the lots on high ground and conserved those wetlands. We disturbed a minimum of the wetlands and conserved the rest of the bottom as wetlands. Those wetlands clean runoff water before it goes downstream," explains Woods. "In Alpine Valley in Perry we did the same thing on that property. We put all the homes and roads on high ground. In Langston Place we didn't get too close to Lake Lillian. We stayed up on high ground, making it easier to construct roads."

Conservation subdivisions designate greenspaces in ways that ensure they will be

there forever. Those areas typically resemble green fingers extending throughout the development when seen from above. “That’s what I think everybody wants - more natural areas in the community. Nobody wants pavement everywhere. Nobody wants it to look like Atlanta. I’d like to look at a map in 30 years and see fingers of woods all in the developed areas, not just in the southern half of the county,” says Woods.

No matter how passionate the firm may be about this cause, it isn’t something they can do all on their own and are quick to credit the City of Perry for getting behind the idea. “The City of Perry, they have taken this conservation subdivision idea and embraced it. I don’t know why they wouldn’t like it. There are too many advantages to all parties involved not to like it,” says Woods.

“The city has been wonderful to us,” says Bryant. “Perry’s got everything together. They are really open to new ideas and not getting stuck in a rut.”

“They are very knowledgeable,” adds Bailey, who says Perry’s leaders want to encourage growth, while controlling and directing it in a positive direction. “They are open to new ideas, but also are very good planners. They are looking ahead.”

“They want to see development, but want it done right,” says McLeod. “That means considering what is surrounding each development to make it add to existing conditions. We need to establish good relationships with all the inner-workings of

the developments to make sure they are being done correctly, and not just quickly, to make sure the finished product complements surrounding areas.”

Bryant has especially high praise for Mike Beecham, Perry’s community planner “He’s been a blessing for us,” says Bryant. Looking to get a conservation subdivision implemented, Ocmulgee scheduled a meeting in the early part of 2006 to talk about conservation subdivisions with public works and planning and zoning officials from Houston County and the Cities of Perry, Warner Robins and Centerville. Woods says Beecham and Director of Community Development Steve Howard liked what they heard at the meeting. “They left that meeting and hit the ground running,” he says.

Within a few months they helped push through the adoption of a new ordinance. Formerly, Perry had a cluster development ordinance, according to Woods. “It was the same idea, just not as stringent. It was very loose. The ordinance we have now is much more strict, but makes much more sense,” says Woods. “Mike is a super planner. He sees the value of implementing these subdivisions now as opposed to the old way. It will be a better looking community in the future if these conservation subdivisions are used,” he adds.

Woods hopes Houston County and Warner Robins and Centerville will also soon adopt a similar ordinance. “If they do, I think in the future they will be extremely glad they

did. I hope they recognize the need before it is too late,” he says.

As natives to Houston County and the surrounding area, the company’s leaders have a vested interest in the community’s long term viability, which extends beyond just capitalizing on the current building boom. Bryant and Bailey, a brother and sister team, are both from Warner Robins. Woods and McLeod are friends from nearby Pulaski County who first met at Middle Georgia College in Cochran in 1991.

It was Woods and Bryant, both civil engineering graduates of Georgia Southern University, who first formed Ocmulgee. The two founders met when Bryant worked as an intern for Woods in Hawkinsville during the Golden Isles Parkway project that is making US Highway 341 a four-lane highway from Perry to Brunswick. “We used to kid around that we wanted to open up our own business one day,” says Bryant.

“I used to work for the Georgia Department of Transportation as a construction engineer on the job site. I did that for seven years, and I knew I didn’t want to do that for the rest of my life,” says Woods. About a year after he met Bryant on the 341 project, Woods left the DOT to work as a civil engineer on Robins Air Force Base. “To tell you the truth, if you had told me five years ago that I would leave the Base, I’d have told you that you were crazy. I had a good job on base – one of the best jobs on base,” says Woods.

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It was while Woods was still working at Robins and Bryant had just left for Atlanta that the two first began doing the side work that would lead to Ocmulgee’s formation. Despite his professional contentment, Woods felt going out on their own was a risk not only worth taking, but also one he was compelled to take. He asked himself, “If you don’t give yourself a chance, why should anybody else?” The move was still a scary one for Woods, but he knew he and his partners could handle it. “I knew we had the skills and abilities, we just had to take the chance.”

While the founders were planning the official launch of Ocmulgee as a full-time enterprise, things were already going so well they were able to immediately bring on Bailey, Bryant’s sister and a marketing graduate of Georgia College & State University, and McLeod, a surveying and mapping graduate of Southern Tech, along with an office full of loyal and dedicated employees. “God has a plan for us all. One door started opening after another,” Bryant says. “Everybody just clicked. It was a perfect partnership.”

McLeod was working as a contract surveyor in Dallas when Woods approached him about joining him and Bryant. “I knew he had been wanting to get back home; the opportunity

just hadn’t been there,” says Woods. So he set up a meeting between Bryant and McLeod at the Georgia State Farmers Market in Atlanta in June 2005. They talked for several hours and the three instantly knew they had the formation of something special. “Chad was impressed with Marty, and Marty was impressed with Chad. Afterwards, they both told me, ‘I couldn’t have asked to meet a better person,’” says Woods.

Despite status as the fastest growing county in Georgia, Houston County has managed to hold on to the family atmosphere that is important to people like McLeod, who was also able to return home and be near his family by joining Ocmulgee. “I’m back where I am from,” he says. “Family means a lot to me.”

“We are a really family-oriented business. Family comes first. That helps keep morale high,” says Bryant. Many of the Ocmulgee’s 13 employees are kin, from fathers to cousins of the partners.

So why does a Perry-based surveying, engineering, consulting and planning firm bear the name of a river that begins in north central Georgia? The word Ocmulgee is derived from the Native American word Okmulgee, which means “where water boils up” in the Hitchiti language and is believed to be a reference to Indian Springs just north in

Butts County. The roots of engineering are in hydrology, which is the study of water and its interaction with the environment. Bryant says he and Woods were crossing the Ocmulgee bridge in Hawkinsville one day and, “It just hit us.” They liked the link between river’s name and the early days of engineering as the study of water. It was also something regional that most people could identify.

“No one can say or spell it, though,” jokes Bailey.

“We get past that,” asserts McLeod. “If they don’t know the Ocmulgee, they’re not from around here and probably just moved here recently.”

The aforementioned growth in Houston County means there is lots of work within easy reach for the Ocmulgee crew. Located on Wes Park Drive, they have several projects within a few minutes’ drive time. Some of Ocmulgee’s current projects include the subdivisions Avington Glenn, New Haven, Evening Shade and Buckeye Ridge, all in Perry, and Governor’s Cove in Warner Robins. They are also working on projects for the Houston County Board of Education such as the new Lake Joy Elementary School and the addition to King’s Chapel Elementary School. “Most of our work is within a few miles of the house. We don’t have to venture too far,” says Bryant.



L to R: Jeffery McDonald, Tyler Goss, Shane Strong, Clint Coleman and Project Manager Lance Woods



Project Designer Chad Bryant



Head Surveyor Marty McLeod

While being positioned in the right place at the right time has certainly been helpful, the Ocmulgee partners feel the real key to their success is that, unlike with larger firms, clients can talk directly with the people in charge, who also happen to be the same people doing the actual work on their projects. “Most clients enjoy the fact that they can walk in and sit down with us,” says Bryant. “We are a small firm, and they are working directly with the principals that have an interest in the success of their project,” he says.

“The people in a town deserve an explanation of what is happening in their community. They often think of development as a negative thing. We try to bring out the positives.”

That extra attention is what makes Ocmulgee’s work different from the competition, says Bailey. “We put more planning in and that results in more thought out subdivisions,” she says.

“The bottom line is it makes the client more money,” states McLeod.

Forethought in the first stages of planning a subdivision is critical to a successful development, explains Bryant. “It’s no different than framing a house. If you have a bad foundation, everything else is going to be out of whack,” he says.

All that extra thought and planning doesn’t mean slower service, however. Having both engineers and surveyors working under the

same roof means less wasted time as the two wait for each other to complete work. With other engineering firms, the engineers have to call on an outside survey firm, which may not put the same high priority on the project.

Ocmulgee’s goal as a business is to be a “one stop” solution for clients in need of surveying, engineering, consulting or planning. “They can find everything they are going to need in one place,” says McLeod.

Surveying property, in the words of McLeod, is simply “defining what you

have or dividing it up.” When it comes to engineering, Ocmulgee does both commercial and residential. On the commercial side, they plan “everything outside the building,” including parking, drainage and placement of utilities. On the residential side, they layout lots, design roads for traffic flow and safety, as well as plan drainage and utilities placement.

Ocmulgee consults their clients by “talking about the project and reviewing plans” and then giving a professional opinion on the best way to deal with issues within the project. It also sometimes means being an expert witness in a court of law.

One new service with which Ocmulgee has had a good deal of success is as an annexation

and zoning advocate for clients. This is Bailey’s specialty, and she has seen the demand for her skills grow along with Houston County. Essentially, she works with planning and zoning officials to make sure they fully understand a proposed project before having to vote on its approval. Traditionally, developers have relied upon lawyers to do this, but lawyers frequently put others on the defensive from the beginning, making it more difficult to get the green light for a development, she says.

“Land is getting scarce. People are getting smarter,” says Bailey about the need for her specialty, which takes the pressure to properly explain the aspects of their projects off the developers. “The people in a town deserve an explanation of what is happening in their community. They often think of development as a negative thing. We try to bring out the positives,” she says.

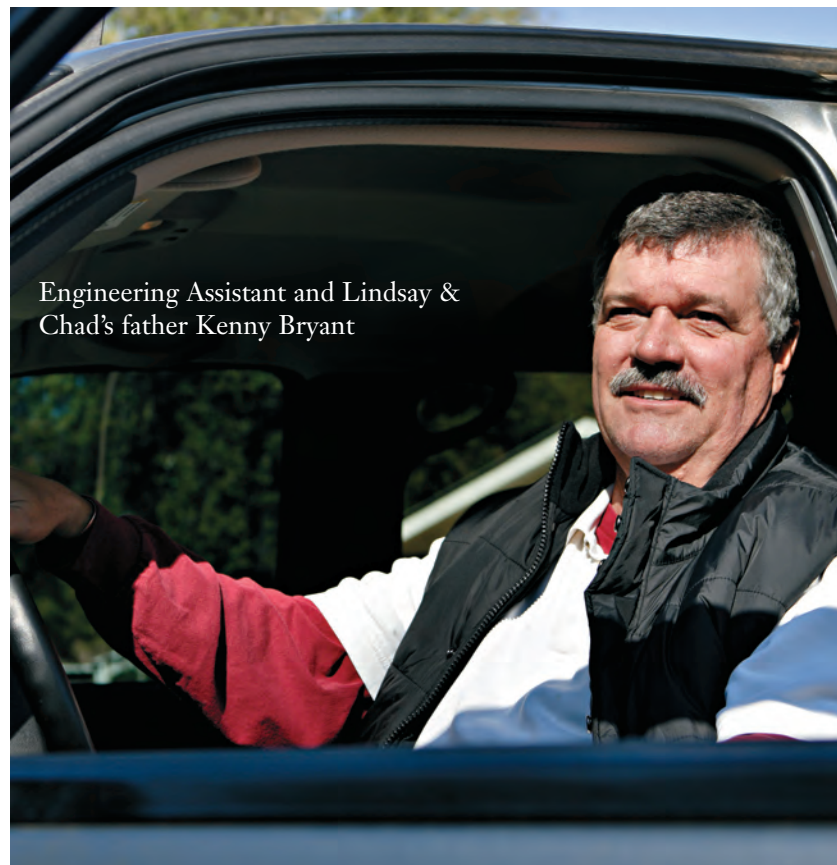
Ocmulgee Site & Environmental Services, Inc., is barely one year old, yet on the forefront of responsible development in Houston County. Ocmulgee has figured out how to build a thriving business that not only treats its customers well, but also treats its community well. As their work spreads throughout their home community, they are doing what they can to leave Houston County even better than where they found it.

Stephen Jones

Photography by Ken Krakow



Annexation and Zoning Specialist Lindsay Bailey



Engineering Assistant and Lindsay & Chad’s father Kenny Bryant