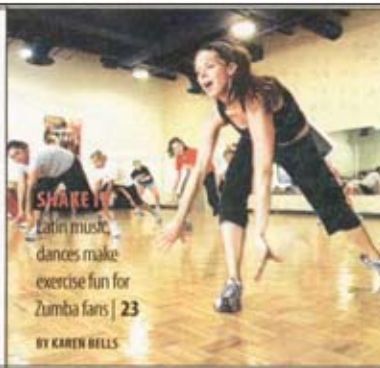


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BY KAREN BELLS

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Turning the soil

BY DAN MONK | dmonk@bizjournals.com

When the local housing market took a turn for the worse last year, the Doesburg family elected not to participate.

Rick Doesburg, owner of Thornton Landscape in Malneville, recession-proofed his company by acquiring a landscape-maintenance firm, All About Lawns, in September. That added about \$600,000 in revenue to the 37-year-old company he acquired from the Thornton family in 1999. The company is now on pace to achieve 10 percent revenue growth to \$3.6 million this year. Without the new division, sales would have declined 12 percent to \$2.9 million.

The plan helped Thornton avoid layoffs, deepen its management team and advance a succession plan in which Doesburg hopes to transfer ownership to his son, Andy, by 2011.

"My background is design. His isn't,"

said Rick Doesburg. "I figured it'd be a good thing for him to have his boat in another lake. Maintenance is a whole different business than design-build. It's about managing time, manpower and efficiency. But that happens to be one of our strengths."

Doesburg's recession-fighting strategy is sound because it gives Thornton Landscape an advantage for securing new business when the economy recovers. Many companies respond to business downturns by simply cutting

Not content to just wait out economic woes or lay off staff, Thornton Landscape tackled it by adding profitable division

THORNTON, PAGE 18

The new
division added
\$600,000
in annual revenue



THORNTON: *New landscape maintenance division has been profitable*

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jobs, said Nancy Bertaux, an economics professor at Xavier University. But that can be a short-sighted approach.

"If you shed too many employees, you might have a harder time getting your foot back up when the recession ends," she said. "Sounds like they found a way to keep their employees and maybe even grow."

SETTING BUILDER APART

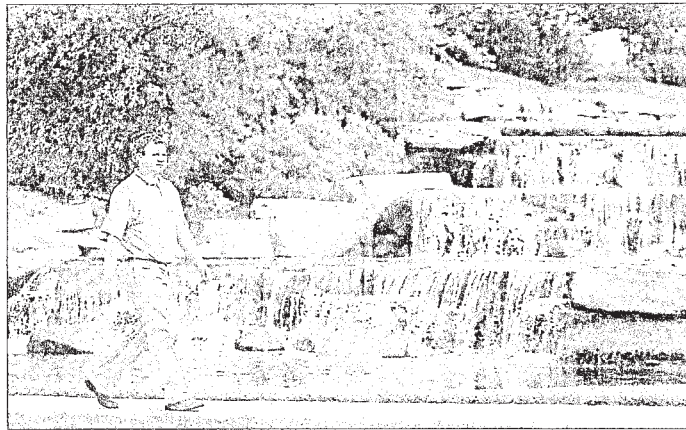
Thornton has a reputation for design quality and horticultural knowledge cultivated over decades, said Tom Humes, whose Great Traditions Land and Development Co. has contracted with it since its 1984 inception. Humes has used Thornton-designed landscapes to set his developments apart from other residential projects. One example is Vintage Club in Montgomery, where Thornton designed the gateway entry and installed landscaping around empty-nester homes that sold at a brisk pace during a housing slump. Humes sold 31 homes there in the last 12 months, generating \$28 million in total sales volume.

"They were believers in green space and quality landscaping long before it was mainstream in the industry," Humes said.

But Doesburg knew trouble was coming last fall, when several contacts in the housing industry told him about declining traffic. "Developers don't go to the next phase until they're substantially finished with the first phase," he said. "The marketplace just isn't there for new home sales."

NOT FIRM'S FIRST TIME

Thornton had a landscape-maintenance division before Doesburg bought the com-



BRUCE CRIPPEN | COURIER

Andy Doesburg said the work done by Thornton Landscape at Rivers Bend in Warren County is the company's crown jewel, still generating inquiries and new customers.

pany in 1999, but the family sold the maintenance company to another buyer against whom Doesburg agreed not to compete. The competition restrictions had expired by last fall, when Andy Doesburg started talking to an old friend about getting back into the maintenance business.

"All About Lawns was owned by one of our former employees, Brad Phillips, and his wife, Heather," Andy Doesburg said. "We were really investing in Brad, as much as anything."

Doesburg said the 2-year-old company had about 50 residential clients, but it had become too time-consuming for Phillips, also an East Coast Hockey League referee.

Rick Doesburg invested less than \$100,000 in the acquisition and the purchase of new equipment. Thornton shifted its focus to the commercial sector, signing deals with local condo associations. The division has grown to 12 employees -- sometimes redeployed for work on Thornton's design-build contracts. That reduces the need for seasonal employment fluctuations and helps Thornton attract better labor talent.

While the rising prices of gas and materials are putting cost pressures on the division, it has run profitably.

"Between his energy, knowledge and experience and our controls, it's a pretty good fit," Rick Doesburg said.