

No. 1

FSA INC.

TWO-YEAR REVENUE GROWTH: 2,356.71%
2014 REVENUE: \$26.97 MILLION

Francisco Semsch knows he's got a dragon by the tail when it comes to his design-build architecture firm's wild ride that accounts for 2,357 percent revenue growth since 2012.

"I never expected it to go this well," he said from his firm's small suite in a nondescript single-story office park off Linebaugh Road in Tampa.

He's admitted he got lucky in choosing his design-build partnerships and bidding on military projects, but if luck favors the prepared, it appears to give special treatment to the understated.

Despite FSA Architect's recent success, Semsch still drives his 2006 Jeep Grand Cherokee. He still wears a Tommy Hilfiger watch.

He also still talks about the first few weeks after he immigrated to the U.S. from El Salvador in 1982 as if they happened this summer.

The job he thought was lined up in Houston when he moved to the U.S. was gone when he arrived, so Semsch got out a phone book and a map, and rented an apartment closest to where the architecture firms were in town. Knowing almost no English, he made a list of all the firms that had a Hispanic-sounding name on the door and started knocking.

"There were 34 firms, and I knocked on 24 doors before I found someone to talk to me in Spanish," he said.

The firm was Wahlberg Morales Wright Waite and Associates. Paul Wahlberg "had a big mustache and a thick Texas accent," making it difficult for Semsch to even read his lips as the partners looked over his portfolio.

"The one thing I heard clearly was, 'I don't have enough to pay you. You're overqualified,'" Semsch recalled. "I told him I could work for free for two weeks to prove my value."

An American architecture career was born.

By 1986, Semsch had his license and went to the American Institute of Architects to find out where the



Francisco Semsch

most work was in his industry – Massachusetts and Florida. He had never seen a flake of snow in his life.

"It was a no-brainer," he said.

Semsch rode out a few economic cycles, bouncing between South Florida and Tampa Bay, opening Florida branches for larger architecture firms with out-of-state headquarters. He learned by watching other firms make strategic moves, and during a building boom in 2003, he started his own firm – FSA.

Then the 2008 real estate crash forced him to diversify.

FSA was part of a team that was pulled in to bid on the first American Consulate in Mazar-e Sharif, Afghanistan. He got a taste of the design-build trend the U.S. government was doing more of, and reset his goals.

"I had to diversify," he said. "And to diversify, I had to learn new skills."

He went back to school to get his contractor's license and developed a five-year plan to find a joint-venture partner that could help his new company bid on projects that don't go bankrupt during economic downturns: government contracts.

He met Joe Kokolakis, president of J. Kokolakis

Contracting, and felt an immediate connection.

Founded in 1988, J. Kokolakis Contracting is a \$182 million company based in Tarpon Springs.

"Joe Kokolakis has a portfolio of work that can help us win a pretty good range of work," Semsch said. "The biggest piece of luck [helping FSA achieve such high-percentage revenue growth] is having Joe Kokolakis in the same frame of mind as us."

The joint venture has helped FSA land some exciting military contracts, including a drone hangar at Fort Carson in Colorado Springs.

"We are trying to be on the cutting edge of technology," he said.

That project was fast-tracked, meaning it needed to be done in half the time, despite its complexity. This was a big component to FSA's revenue growth, Semsch said. In 2012, its revenue was \$1.1 million. By 2014, it was \$27 million.

Several times while telling his story, Semsch mentions designing a five-year plan at different times during his career. The next plan includes diversifying even more with some development work.

"Right now, the plan is to repeat," he said.

– Chris Wilkerson

1

FSA ARCHITECTS INC.

FRANCISCO SEMSCH, PRESIDENT

3-YEAR REVENUE GROWTH – 2,356.56%

"Determination, belief, planning, people, execution and luck.

FSA has been in business since 2003. From 2003 to 2005 FSA provided architectural services to the private sector. From 2005 to 2009, FSA teamed up as the architectural/engineering partner with general contractors working on design-build federal projects including the first American Consulate in Mazar-e Sharif, Afghanistan.

"From this experience FSA became more familiar with opportunities within the federal sector. In 2009 FSA decided to refocus its services from architectural to a design-build company including construction services and increase its market by adding the federal sector.

FSA's business plan was to market design-build services for mid- to large-size building projects. To

achieve the projected volume of work in the next five years, FSA had to team up with an experienced company in federal projects and solid financials. After two years of conversations with four local companies FSA created a Joint Venture with J. Kokolakis Contracting of Tarpon Springs in 2011.

"The JV identified appropriate projects to pursue and was awarded three federal building projects from 2011 to 2013.

"The project awarded in late 2013 was a fast track 11 month design-build project which normally would have been a two-year project based on the building size and complexity.

"Given this project's size and fast track schedule, FSA realized extraordinary revenue in 11 months during our 2014 calendar/fiscal year, creating FSA's 2014 rapid growth."

