



J. Masterson Construction

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*Anyone can
dig a hole.*

But what about relocating an active, 12-inch sewer main through a downtown area, or carving out space for a foundation between an active football stadium and a baseball field?

That takes practice, and J. Masterson Construction has 35 years of practice.

As J. Masterson Construction, a second-generation, family-owned site development company based in Danvers, Massachusetts, steps into its 35th year of business, it's stepping into its golden age—an era in which the hyperlocal company has reached the perfect size to juggle multiple complex projects and handle anything from a \$10,000-job to a \$10 million-job.

Masterson started as a utility contractor but over the years its services have grown to include site development, excavation, parking lot construction, roadway construction, environmental services, snow management and more. The past few years, Masterson has found itself taking on more and more complex projects.

“As we complete one difficult job, it leads us to the next one, typically through repeat customers” says Vice President Bill Peach.

That snowball effect has led to three projects in four years for Masterson at St. John’s Prep, a Catholic middle and high school in Danvers, Massachusetts. Under its customer Windover Construction, Masterson first relocated a tennis court complex for the school. That led to site work for a science, technology, engineering and math, or STEM, building.

In 2017, Masterson is working on a wellness center with a pool, gymnasium, indoor track and additional parking lots, also for the school.

Not only does the wellness center have the added complexity of an indoor pool, the final product will be a tiered building built into the hillside and wedged between a baseball field on one side and a football stadium, two stories lower, on the other side. From the baseball field, one entry will lead to the wellness center’s first floor. The pool and gymnasium are at basement-level, and from the subbasement, where the mechanical equipment is housed, a tunnel will lead out onto the football field.

To make this possible, Masterson is blasting 3,000-cubic-yards of ledge and using a temporary earth retention wall to hold up the baseball field so that games and practices can continue during construction.

“As we’ve grown, our customers have brought us along and keep challenging us with more complicated projects,” Peach says.

Hyperlocal company reaches its golden age, finds sweet spot with complex projects



Masterson is the local company

Most of Masterson's projects are within an hour of its office, and Masterson is committed to its Danvers community. That shows in projects like those at St. John's Prep, which is just a mile from Masterson's office.

The company's local footprint is partly due to logistics—it doesn't make financial sense for Masterson to travel large distances with its heavy equipment that includes backhoes, excavators, bulldozers and loaders. It's also due to Masterson's commitment to its employees. Most of the staff lives very close and some have been with the company for 30 years, partially because they appreciate not having to travel to places as far away as Rhode Island for projects like other contractors in the area.

"I like to think, you help them out and they help you out," Peach says.

The community, in turn, has committed a good deal of business to Masterson over the years. Masterson is the company the Danvers area turns to when it needs a hole dug or a parking lot built, whether that's a contractor who needs \$10,000 worth of excavation done for an addition he's putting on his house or a Lowe's and Target complex that needs \$10 million worth of site development work.



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Anyone can dig a hole. It takes a little more finesse to take on the type of complex utility and site development projects J. Masterson Construction has made its niche.



Finding its size sweet spot

Despite being limited to about an hour radius around Danvers, Masterson has not been limited in the type of work it takes on.

“As an excavating utility contractor, we tend to weather a lot of the economic cycles,” Peach says. “We went through a period where we were doing a lot of private school work. Now we’re doing a lot of hotel work and a lot of car dealership work. Somebody who just builds hotels can’t just go build car dealerships, but a guy that digs a hole for a hotel can dig a hole for car dealerships, so we tend to weather those economic cycles.”

What helps to set Masterson Construction apart is the fact that it started as a utility contractor and holds firm to those roots.

“Anyone can dig a hole, not anyone can relocate an active, 12-inch sewer main through downtown,” Peach says, “So our utility experience has set us apart, always. A lot of times the utility part of the project is the more complex part of it.”

Getting its foot in the door by doing the complex utility elements of a project often helps Masterson prove itself to customers and turn one-time clients into long-term partners.

Today, with 65 employees, Masterson has found its ideal size.

“We’re very large for a family business but we’re smaller than a union business, so we fill a gap, and I think we have a good niche where we can handle large, complex projects but also do smaller projects,” Peach says.

Though it can handle anything from the \$10,000-project to the \$10-million-project, Masterson’s ideal contract value is \$1-3 million. That’s allowed Masterson to grow deliberately but modestly.

“It’s very hard to stay one size,” Peach says.

“I don’t want to say it’s easy to grow but it’s easy to go out and get more work and hire in a good economy. In a bad economy it’s easy to say, ‘We’re just going to slow down and lay some people off.’ We think we’ve reached a pretty sweet spot where our staff level hasn’t really changed in the last three to four years, and we’ve been able to still keep our employees and customers happy.”

Going forward, Masterson hopes to maintain this stable size and grow instead through complex, challenging projects, like the St. John’s wellness center, projects that push Masterson and its staff to the next level. •