

Full Service Civil Engineering, Surveying, Planning and Construction Management



Sepideh S. Asefnia- CEO

We are a full service civil engineering, surveying, planning and construction management firm, founded in 2001, and based in Raleigh, North Carolina. We are committed to providing a challenging and fulfilling career for all employees along with a work environment that fosters creativity, ingenuity, and growth. Our commitment to these values is apparent in our success. In the past few years we have undertaken numerous projects for public and private sector clients.

Interview conducted by: Lynn Fosse, Senior Editor, CEOCFO Magazine

CEOCFO: Ms. Asefnia, what was the vision when you founded SEPI Engineering?

Ms. Asefnia: My vision, when I founded the company, was about starting and growing a full service engineering firm that would create a very unique work environment for employees. I was very much focused on creating a place where employees would feel challenged and happy being there. I felt it was very important to have a fun work environment where everyone has a great team attitude and my goal was to be able to grow a successful business that serves the communities that we work and live in.

CEOCFO: How has that vision played out? What is the vision and focus today?

Ms. Asefnia: My vision principally did not change, it evolved. We faced many challenges to stay strong and grow the business during an exceptionally challenging decade. I started the company in 2001, we had 9/11, the war in Iraq, financial crisis, federal sequestration and local departments of transportation had financial issues as well. I started diversifying our client sector from DOT to the Private Sector which started having its own challenges. We also started pursuing federal government and then they had sequestration. Therefore, I have to say that the challenges were much, much more than I ever anticipated. However, I truly believe the vision has worked. We have been able to grow steadily over the past thirteen years. Our revenue has grown. Our employees have grown. We now have three offices in North Carolina. We have a very diverse client base. Paying a great deal of attention to the culture of our growing company and making sure employees are excited about what they do every day is a constant challenge and is a high priority for me.

We have a culture of embracing change, which makes every person in the firm think about how can I be a part of this changing world we live in and contribute to growing myself as a professional and help the firm grow.

CEOCFO: What are typical types of project for SEPI?

Ms. Asefnia: We have 5 divisions, Transportation, Land Development, Construction Management, Environmental planning and permitting and construction inspection and maintenance. Depending on the project we can offer all or one of the above services on a particular job. An example of a project that utilized all of our services was the construction of a new middle school in Wake County, NC. In this project, we prepared land development plans, surveyed the property, performed environmental wetland delineation and permitting. In addition we designed the widening of the road in front of the school, designed the traffic signal and we were hired by the owner to manage construction administration and inspection for the project.

CEOCFO: Why are your clients choosing SEPI? What do you understand about engineering and construction that perhaps other firms do not quite get as well?

Ms. Asefnia: There are several reasons why the client chooses to hire SEPI but I have to say the most important reason is our relationship with the client and the past performance. We work very hard to gain the clients trust by being the expert in what we say we do, we keep our promises, we are very conscious of the project budget and we offer very creative solutions. Overall our goal is to provide a very easy and happy experience for our clients.

CEOCFO: *What are some of the more challenges to overcome in some of your projects? What have you faced that is a little maybe outside the box and that you have been able to tackle successfully?*

Ms. Asefnia: Most of our projects have unique challenges. For example, we provided rapid design response to ongoing shoreline erosion threatening historic artifacts at a state historic site providing a solution that could be implemented quickly to temporarily control erosion and protect historic artifacts. We are now “thinking outside of the box” as we work on a possible permanent solution, pending state and federal regulatory approval, which would allow tidal flows to pass through the units while protecting the shoreline from the energy of wind and vessel generated waves. The proposed design would help minimize environmental impacts before a wave can reach the shoreline.

CEOCFO: *Dealing with government entities is always challenging. What have you learned over the years in how best to navigate the waters?*

Ms. Asefnia: Simply know their processes. The government process is very different than other clients and when you have experienced staff working on those projects it makes all the difference.

CEOCFO: *Are there particular types of projects that you like, either personally or from a business perspective, given, if you had, your choice of everything to do?*

Ms. Asefnia: I always love the project that utilizes many of our services and is profitable.

CEOCFO: *That is the business side, but give us the personal side as well.*

Ms. Asefnia: Going back to our mission statement, personally I feel our projects truly improve the quality of life for our communities and that is very satisfying to me.

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CEOCFO: *What is your geographic reach today?*

Ms. Asefnia: We are in the South East United States. We currently have active projects in North Carolina, South Carolina and Georgia. In the past we have worked in Florida, Virginia, Tennessee and West Virginia.

CEOCFO: *Are you able to ramp up if a number of projects come in at the same time? How do you deal with the ebb and flow of work that could be available for you?*

Ms. Asefnia: Yes, we are able to ramp up when a number of projects come in at the same time as we plan ahead as much as possible. Staffing for projects is one of the hardest pieces of running the business. What has worked well in the past is when we win a major project and we have to staff up for it, I recognize “what is life after this project” immediately. Therefore, we start to plan ahead as much as possible.

CEOCFO: *What do you do day to day as CEO? What is your schedule like and your focus as CEO?*

Ms. Asefnia: My number one focus is to make sure that all of the business units are running very well and all of our internal and external processes are doing well. Therefore, I do not get involved deep into any business unit, but am keep informed and provide guidance as needed during our weekly managers’ meetings which include all business line managers. In addition, we communicate as needed via text, calls or whatever. My big picture is making sure that all of that runs well. Then I spend a lot of time thinking about what is next. My biggest responsibility is to keep the growth, to communicate the vision, to understand and expand the vision and to implement the vision internally in all of the offices. I actually spend a great amount of time outside the company networking through my service on various associations and community boards, on business development calls and various engagements outside of the office. That has been very, very beneficial to me when I am outside the company I can, hopefully, stay ahead and have a better picture of what we need to get into next, instead of focusing inside.

CEOCFO: *What is the key for the company in keeping up with the newest technology? How does the company know what to pay attention to and what might fall by the wayside?*

Ms. Asefnia: Going back to our value system; for us one of the values that we have in the company is embracing change and always finding change exciting. We put a lot of value in embracing change. It can be looking for change in technology, client base or the economy, or in our employee pool. When you have that mindset you are always looking. Therefore, you are open to listening and to understanding, instead of dismissing it, we embrace it. We pay attention and see how it is going to impact or apply to our business. We were one of the first construction inspection firms in North Carolina that provided iPads to their field employees. Keeping up with new technology has to be part of the DNA of the company. For us, it is just a part of who we are.

CEOCFO: *We know that business is good as SEPI has been recognized on the Inc 5000 List. How do you keep up the trajectory? Why should people pay attention to SEPI Engineering?*

Ms. Asefnia: I think that we keep up the trajectory by looking ahead and outside of us much more than just inside. It is a simultaneous factor of looking at the big picture, looking at the national trends, looking at the global trends and understanding where the next investment is going to be. In addition we invest in client experience, I believe that is what will make us stay successful.

BIO: Ms. Asefnia is President and Owner of SEPI Engineering & Construction, Inc. (SEPI), founded in 2001. Ms. Asefnia has led SEPI to unprecedented growth during one of the most difficult economic times in our country's history.

Prior to forming SEPI, Ms. Asefnia spent over 16 years in the field of transportation engineering design and management, of which she worked approximately 12 years with the North Carolina Department of Transportation in Highway Design and Traffic Engineering. Her current day to day responsibilities include overseeing the firm's projects in North and South Carolina, providing quality control for all projects, financial and administrative management, and business development.

EDUCATION

BS, Civil Engineering, North Carolina State University, 1993

BS, Agricultural Engineering, North Carolina State University, 1985

REGISTRATIONS

Professional Engineer: North Carolina (2014), South Carolina, Tennessee, Georgia, Virginia, West Virginia, Florida, Maryland

PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATIONS

American Council of Engineering Companies (ACEC)

13 YEARS WITH SEPI

16 YEARS WITH OTHER FIRMS

A series of strategic growth decisions and initiatives have fueled SEPI's growth. When it was founded 13 years ago, the company worked predominantly on civil and roadway design, traffic engineering, and surveying services. Diversification into environmental planning and permitting, water resources, and Construction Engineering Inspection helped Ms. Asefnia grow the firm and buffer it from downturns in other markets. Several years of diligent effort helped SEPI enter the federal market at just the right time, and work for the Army Corps of Engineers and other agencies has bolstered the firm's growth.

Ms. Asefnia is active in the community and currently serves on the following:

- Raleigh Chamber of Commerce, Past Chair of the Board of Directors
- North Carolina Chamber
- International Affairs Council, Past Chair of the Board
- NC State University Board of Visitors
- Duke-Raleigh Hospital Board of Advisors
- TrustAtlantic Bank Board of Directors
- NC State University Civil Engineering Advisory Board
- Institute for Emerging Issues National Advisory Board
- Triangle Land Conservancy Board of Directors

Ms. Asefnia has won numerous awards, including:

- Triangle Business Journal's 2013 Leaders in Diversity Award
 - 2012/2011 Inc. Magazine's Inc. 5000
 - Triangle Business Journal's 2012 Fast 50 Award
 - 2012/2011 Hot Firms List, Fastest-Growing Firms
 - Business Opportunity & Workplace Development (BOWD) 2011 Small Professional Services Firm of the Year
 - 2009 Appointed by Governor Perdue to the Department of Commerce Economic Development Board
 - 2007 Enterprising Woman of the Year Award
 - SBA 2006 NC Small Business Person of the Year Award
 - Business Leader 2005 Women Extraordinaire Award
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