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September 4, 2017

www.TheBusinessNewsOnline.com

Vol. 15, No. 10 \$1.00



Will Yates, founder and owner of Precision Installations Inc., stands in the workshop of the business at Prospect Ct., Appleton. He said the new, larger building his company is moving to next spring will help the company continue its growth. The Business News photo by Jean Peerenboom

Finding a niche in communications sector

Appleton company installs equipment in emergency vehicles and watercraft

By Jean Peerenboom

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Will Yates has taken his communications equipment company from humble beginnings in 1996 to a multi-million dollar business in Appleton that will move to a new, bigger building in March.

Yates was an electronic technician with the U.S. Navy for 10 years in the 1980s. He and his family planned to stay in California when he left the Navy, “but chose to have the Navy move us back to my home state enlistment of Illinois,” he said.

So, he spent the next eight years as a civilian in retail management opening new stores for a large retail electronics chain throughout the Midwest. His job was to staff and open several stores throughout Illinois, Iowa and Wisconsin. After a few years, he decided to use Oshkosh as a home base and started a car stereo installation business on the side.

In 1996, he joined Pierce Manufacturing as an aerial electrician while continuing the car stereo business. Pierce had just been purchased by Oshkosh Truck, he said. He was asked if he would also work with Pierce on installing communication equipment in their fire trucks.

“I had a unique skill set. They had communication systems and needed to install the equipment,” he said, and he was willing to share his talents. “It made for some long hours” and he finally asked the technicians from the car stereo business to help.

“By 2007, I felt I had to resign,” Yates said. That is when the car stereo business was sold and Precision Installations, Inc. was born. He quickly branched out to installing communication equipment in emergency and other vehicles. “We became a tier one supplier for Pierce and Oshkosh Truck,” he said. Most of the work is done onsite, but Precision was leasing some small spaces with workspace.

The company also repairs and maintains communication systems for its clients.

At that time, he also started another related business called Precision Wire Harnesses, which builds wire harnesses for a variety of vehicle sectors. Both are in the leased space on Prospect Court, where office space was added on. The company now has 18 employees.

“By 2017, we found we needed more space,” Yates said. A new 17,500-square-foot building on Watermark Court in the Village of Fox Crossing has been designed and will be built with Keller as the contractor. It is across from Pierce Manufacturing, which is convenient, he said, because Pierce remains a primary client.

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— Will Yates, owner, Precision Installations, Appleton

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The new building will have three service bays and full compliment of offices. Ground breaking is set for Sept. 11, “which is ironic because of the importance to the fire community,” he said.

“We’ve been blessed,” Yates said. “We’ve not really advertised. We’ve grown with Pierce — within their system. We also do some work for Oshkosh Truck. These are our two biggest clients, and we do work for a lot of other smaller companies here and there. Our main focus is in the public safety industry.”

“We have experienced exponential growth,” Yates said, “so we will be changing our business model a bit and will be offering different services,” as well as looking for other services to add in the future.

Precision Installations sells and installs communication equipment for vehicles such as fire, police and ambulance vehicles as well as snow removal. It also services watercraft requiring radar, GPS and other communication systems. The staff can do some installations in its workspace, but is willing to go to marinas or other clients’ businesses as needed. The new building plans include developing mobile units.

“Our focus is providing quality installations within a reasonable timeline,” Yates said. “While other companies may need weeks lead to complete, with our new building and additional space, we will be able to do installations in a much shorter timeframe.”

With the building project, Yates started a third company, Precision Property Group. The other two companies will lease from this company. It also opens up opportunities for expansion into the commercial real estate business and helps diversify the overall business interests. Yates said he is considering looking at building and leasing other commercial properties in the area.

As he looks at today’s marketplace, Yates said, “There is not a lot of competition for us. This is a unique skill set. The difficulty, however, is finding good employees with these skills. It takes about two years of training before someone can work on a vehicle independently.”

“In this environment where unemployment is low, we have to recruit people,” he said. At the same time, he said he has been fortunate that during the lean years of recent economic downturns, he has been able to avoid layoffs and maintain wages and benefits for his employees, thus maintaining steady growth for the company.