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Strategizing recovery through
fire and flood

Interwest Consulting Group Inc.



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Produced by John Carioti & Written by Talo Thomson

Founded by Terry Rodrigue in 2002, Interwest Consulting Group Inc. (Interwest) has been providing consulting services to public agencies for more than a decade. The Colorado-based company holds offices in nine locations across the state, California and Nevada, as well as several other offices co-located within its many clients.

Interwest emphasizes quality service as its No. 1 priority, providing plan review and safety inspections on a vast array of public projects. Specializing in building and safety, city engineering, capital project and construction management, GIS, real property services, traffic engineering, transportation planning and more, the company's niche is one of privatizing

public functions.

"You could call it domestic outsourcing for public agencies," Rodrigue elaborates.

The company prides itself on its quickly growing staff of 180 professionals, hailing from a wide variety of executive and municipal backgrounds. A unique ability to assimilate into any public agency, immediately contributing industry knowledge, distinguishes Interwest as the go-to consulting firm for any form of project and program management service. The company contributes expertise to large-scale undertakings, such as the Hatchet Ridge Wind Farm Project in Burney, Calif., or the \$8 billion 67-



acre Las Vegas re-development venture, as well as smaller-scale projects like hotel, hospital and church construction.

Disaster relief and reconstruction are a large part of Interwest's mission, too; Rodrigue has spent his last four years helping Boulder County, Colo., recover from an unlucky streak of natural disasters. Bringing his experience in California with earthquakes and wildfires to Boulder, Rodrigue has been integral to the county's recovery efforts post fire and flood.

When disaster strikes

In September 2010, the Boulder County four-mile canyon fire tore through forest and homes alike. After 11 days, by the time the fire was finally contained, it had proven the most expensive and devastating in the state's history, destroying more than 6,000 acres of forest and 170 homes. Living in Boulder himself, Rodrigue



was immediately on the front lines, partnering with Boulder County to help the community and strategize a recovery plan.

"The response is a sprint for first responders," explains Rodrigue. "What some don't realize is the recovery and rebuilding effort is really the marathon. And these mountain communities were hard hit." Interwest was hired by the county to manage the complex cleanup of devastated homes and to work with the 170 now-homeless families.

"Many people had no fire insurance or were very underinsured," Rodrigue details. "We went through a lengthy process with them and many insurance companies in order to get them help. You also have to worry about where these 170 families are going – they need assistance, they still have mortgages." While shepherding the families through the slow rebuilding process, Rodrigue was also acting on a remarkably prescient suspicion – a flood would follow fire.

"As soon as the county hired us for fire recovery, one of the first things I mentioned to them, as difficult as this may seem, the real disaster you have to prepare for is flooding," Rodrigue recalls. "After a fire, the ground is no longer effective at soaking up water. There's no grass, trees, nothing to hold the water back, or the mud, since the vegetation is destroyed."

Interwest managed an effort to erect many erosion control dams and debris racks over the next couple of years, and the dams held strong during subsequent rain seasons. Then came 2013.

Not your average rainstorm

In 2013, between September 9 and 12, catastrophic flooding ravaged Boulder County. Within a mere three days, a whopping 17 inches of rain had inundated the area, an amount comparable to the region's average precipitation per year.

"Every canyon along this county got an intense amount of rainfall," remembers Rodrigue. "Every



canyon was devastated, even ones with no fire history. We had to help people out; what we did was relatively small and unhelpful compared to the enormity of the damage. But we did what we could.”

Within days, Rodrigue received a phone call from the same county manager in charge of fire recovery; his expertise was needed once more.

Rodrigue and his team immediately got to work rebuilding destroyed mountain roads to gain access to the ravaged high-altitude communities. Bringing in heavy-duty equipment, the team first constructed emergency dirt roads to allow emergency vehicles access, before moving on to the second phase of winter-road construction. The third phase, due to begin in summer 2014 and through 2015, will be permanent roads.

The next priority was debris removal. “It’s amazing after a flood the amount of debris created,” Rodrigue recalls. “Our first goal was hazardous debris removal. We had cars floating down the creek, propane tanks, electrical wires, things that pose imminent threats to

public infrastructure and homes. We’ve spent much of the winter doing assessments to get funding for these projects.”

Rodrigue also collaborated with the county and FEMA in hazardous home and vegetative debris removal. “From a practical standpoint, it’s a huge effort to try and coordinate removal of this much debris,” he continues. “There are trees, rocks, silt, thousands and thousands of tons of debris strewn everywhere.” Though work on these projects is strenuous and ongoing, Rodrigue remains positive about the experience.

“No one wants a disaster, but in my position there’s a definite sense of reward in helping people,” he shares. “Our staff is large and dedicated, and the reality is that we’re rebuilding these roads better and more protected than before. We plan to see the debris removal project through to completion.” With no end for the work in sight, Rodrigue will continue working with Boulder County to rebuild and help those affected in the years to come.

From natural disaster to political catastrophe

The city of Bell, a small blue-collar town near Los Angeles, was relatively unknown before 2010. That summer, a series of investigative reports revealed extensive political corruption; city officials had stolen millions in funds from an already impoverished community, earning the highest public-sector salaries in the country. The corruption was so substantial the city was left with virtually no management because every official was thrown out of office, arrested or both. “It was a ghost town, from the management up,” Rodrigue recalls.

An interim government was appointed, and Rodrigue came on as city engineer in November 2011. Now splitting his time between disaster recovery in Boulder and political recovery in Bell, Rodrigue set to work re-establishing trust and fund management. “The public was leery of government because they had been misled and manipulated for so long,” he explains. “What’s more, there was frankly no money because it was stolen.”

Within a couple of years, Rodrigue was part of a permanent team that helped turn things around. “Under the leadership of a new city council, city manager and permanent department directors the

COMPANY AT A GLANCE

ESTABLISHED : 2002

PRESIDENT : TERRY RODRIGUE

EMPLOYEES : 170

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city’s debt has been reduced by half since the scandal,” he states. “Significant development was brought in and a huge liability has been removed from the city’s books resulting in a reserve fund of \$20 million. It’s been

a huge turnaround.” In a town with a population little more than 35,000, Rodrigue has come to love working in such a close-knit community.

“We want to be a good partner, to do good work and give something back,” Rodrigue clarifies. To that purpose, Rodrigue has spearheaded the new Future Scholars of Bell program, a scholarship aimed at raising \$50,000 for students at the local high school. “We’re seeking students that will excel at local in-state universities, ultimately returning to Bell and hopefully giving back themselves,” he explains.

Whether it be rebuilding a politically corrupt community or a neighborhood ravaged by flood and fire, Rodrigue has proven himself a capable and compassionate player in the world of municipal consulting. With Rodrigue at the helm, and an experienced team in the wings, Interwest Consulting Group Inc. will continue to be an indispensable asset to all manners of public projects in the many years to come. •





INTERWEST CONSULTING GROUP INC.

15061 Springdale Street, 205
Huntington Beach, CA 96249
United States

WWW.INTERWESTGRP.COM