

## Deep roots keep septic biz in the groove

BY MIKE W. THOMAS

The slow economy has challenged many small businesses, including Van Delden On-site Wastewater Systems. The company has seen its revenues drop 20 percent compared to this time last year.

"New building construction is way down and requests for repair work are slow," says Garrett Van Delden, who co-owns the septic system installation company with his wife Pam. "Nobody has the money to spend now. Even the pumping service is down."

Garrett Van Delden says they saw things begin to slow down in September 2008, even more than it normally does at that time of the year. And so far, things have not picked back up significantly.

But the Van Deldens are not worried. They believe their deep roots and experience weathering difficult economies in the past are equipping them to survive the current recession.

"Back in the mid-'80s we learned a lot about dealing with an economic downturn," says Pam Van Delden. "Back then a lot of builders were going bankrupt and they didn't build any new subdivisions for almost 10 years."

Things aren't that bad yet, she notes, and if the economy turns around in 2010 like most people are predicting, it will have been much less severe than the downturn in the 1980s.

"We are still just trucking along," Garrett Van Delden says. "You just have to be careful and watch your expenses. We have been here a long time and we will do what it takes to keep on going."

### Deep roots

Van Delden Onsite Wastewater Systems developed out of a company founded by Garrett's grandfather in 1937. Frank Van Delden immigrated to the United States from Germany in 1907 and came to San Antonio in the mid-1920s. He was a mason and soon found work on construction projects downtown. Before long he began buying and selling new and used pipes and by 1937 had launched a business building and installing concrete septic tanks.

Frank Van Delden passed away in 1955 and left the company to his three sons, one of whom — Gary Van Delden — is Garrett's father. The brothers continued to build and expand the business until 1972 when they decided to split it up and go their separate ways. One of the brothers took the crane part of the business, another took the tractor repair part of the business and Gary Van Delden took the septic system part of it.

Garrett Van Delden, who was married to Pam at that point, started working with his father in 1976 and the couple took over the business full-time by the mid-1980s. After being bought out by his son and daughter-in-law, Gary Van Delden went on to found the Alamo Golf Club in Northwest San Antonio off of Prue Road.

### Environmental changes

In the 1990s several regulatory changes were put in place by the state which significantly changed the septic tank industry. The



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**Van Delden Onsite Wastewater Systems has been a family-operated company since 1937. Current operators include (L-R) Garrett Van Delden, Chad Van Delden, Courtney Van Delden (in back), and Pam Van Delden.**

biggest change was the rule requiring the use of aerobic treatment systems for septic systems in areas where there is less than four feet of usable soil. The soil is necessary to filter out the contaminants from the water before it is absorbed back into the groundwater system. Septic tanks in rocky climates were deemed to not be treating the wastewater effectively enough, Garrett says.

Today about 80 percent of Van Delden's customers use aerobic systems. That is mainly due to the rocky geography around San Antonio and Bexar County, Garrett says, but even some customers who are not required to use it will choose aerobic systems despite the higher cost.

"They like the idea of recycling wastewater," he says. The water treated by an aerobic system can, in some cases, be reused for irrigation purposes.

In addition to installations, the company also pumps, repairs and maintains its products. Septic systems typically cost between \$7,000 and \$10,000 installed.

Garrett Van Delden would not reveal revenue figures for the company other than to note the 20 percent drop since the recession began. But he did say that the company, which employs 15 people, has about 13,500 current customers across South Texas.

The introduction of aerobic systems brought with it a new maintenance aspect to the business. Regular septic systems are pretty much

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**Garrett Van Delden**  
Co-Owner, Van Delden Onsite Wastewater Systems

### Van Delden

**What:** Design, install, repair and cleans septic systems  
**Who:** Garrett and Pam Van Delden, co-owners  
**Employees:** 15  
**Address:** 26665 IH-10 West, Boerne 78006  
**Tel. No.:** 210-698-2000  
**Web site:** [www.vdwws.com](http://www.vdwws.com).

good to go once they have been dropped into the ground, but aerobic systems require regular maintenance to work properly. Today, the maintenance on septic systems for existing customers makes up about 25 percent of Van Delden's business. The aerobic units themselves are built by Clear Stream, a company with headquarters in Beaumont and a tank manufacturing facility in Johnson City.

The company used to make its own septic tanks for regular systems, but now that work is done by Block Crete, a septic tank manufacturer based in Comfort.

Garrett says the septic tank business is pretty steady and, aside from the introduction of aerobic systems, has changed very little over time. Next year, the company will be celebrating the 50th anniversary of one of its employees, Alfonzo Pavlicek, who has worked as a septic tank installer for Van Delden since 1960.

Garrett says that by his estimation, Pavlicek has helped install more than 2,400 septic systems throughout his career.

With longevity like that, Garrett says he is confident the company will be around for generations to come. His daughter Courtney and son Chad are currently working for the family business and learning how the industry works. Courtney, a 2003 Texas A&M graduate, handles all the real estate inspections, while Chad, a 2005 graduate of the University of Texas at San Antonio, is an estimator and organizes the installation crews.

"It is like being in a rodeo," Garrett says of the tough times. "You just hold on until the ride is over."