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CAROLINAS GATEWAY PARTNERSHIP

CROWN LSP BUILDS ON ITS REPUTATION FOR RESPONSIVENESS

By Lawrence Bivins



Though much about the logistics business has changed in the 30 years since Deborah and Greg Hodges founded Crown LSP Group, the same fundamentals apply to the company's value proposition: quality, flexibility, and responsiveness to both customer and community needs.

"Our first office was in Kenly," says Hodges, who started the firm with contacts and experience gained after working for a trucking company. "We needed to be near the truck stops."

The company started modestly as a national freight brokerage. Today, Crown LSP provides a full range of transportation, logistics and warehousing services, occupying 825,000 square feet of space across three Rocky Mount facilities. "We do a wider range of things than our competitors," says Hodges.

Both sites are former textile plants and sit near the junction of I-95 and U.S. Highway 64. Rocky Mount's convenience to mid-Atlantic port complexes gives Crown customers access to global markets. "Proximity to the ports is big for us," says Adam Hodges, operations manager at the family-owned company. Company trucks can reach ports in Norfolk, Morehead City and Wilmington in about two hours. "We're there several times a week," he says.

The company handles goods for customers that include Sandoz, Cummins and Universal Leaf Tobacco. At the heart of its business is a close relationship with Nashville, Tenn.-based Bridgestone Americas. "That's our largest customer," says Greg Hodges, whose company serves as an outside distribution center for Bridgestone. "We have tires in this facility from Mexico, Canada and the U.S.," Hodges says.

Handling tires properly requires strength and know-how not available just anywhere. It also takes being flexible. “They’ve always been willing to adjust their manpower around our schedule,” explains Mike Driver, physical distribution manager at Bridgestone. In addition to warehousing Bridgestone tires in Rocky Mount, Crown bases employees at Bridgestone’s massive plant in Wilson. “We consider them a partner,” says Driver. “They understand our needs and have built that aspect of their business around our needs.”

Bridgestone began working with Crown LSP in the early 1990s. The volume of product handled by Hodges and his Rocky Mount team varies from a few thousand to 10,000 tires daily. The Wilson operation moves an astounding 33,000 tires per day – seven days a week. “They offer flexibility on short notice,” Driver says. “They jump through hoops to make sure our operation is very fluid and efficient.”

Crown takes pride in the quality of its 85-person staff, some of which have been with the company over 25 years. “Our employees are like family,” says Diane Hodges, vice president of Crown LSP. “That goes a long way in supporting the tenure of our workforce.”

Safety Director Robby Causeway started as warehouse manager at Crown LSP 14 years ago. He later worked in the company’s sales office prior to assuming his current position. “They are good folks,” Causeway says of the Hodges family. “I’ve always had opportunities here.”

Crown boasts an exemplary safety record. “In this day and time, you have to care about safety,” Causeway says. The company has quarterly safety meetings with its drivers, reviewing all incidents and near misses. “It’s something that is constantly monitored and kept in the forefront,” he says.

The company is equally committed to its community. In October 2016, when Hurricane Matthew cut a trail of destruction through the Twin Counties, Crown LSP provided a 53-foot trailer as a collection and distribution location for donated items such as blankets, pillows, towels and food. “We were inundated with donations and needed a place for drop-off and pick-up,” recalls Ginny Mohrbutter, executive director of The United Way of the Tar River Region. “It was a tremendous help to us.” Crown LSP also offers free storage space for the Food Bank of Eastern North Carolina and the annual Operation Christmas Child toy drive. “It’s a very community-minded company,” Mohrbutter says.

Now building on a 30-year track record of success, Crown LSP leaders are encouraged by CSX Corporation’s plans for a \$270 million multi-modal cargo hub in Rocky Mount that will open in 2019. Known as the Carolina Connector, the terminal will be just four and six miles from Crown LSP’s two facilities. “We anticipate huge growth in our business due to CSX,” says Greg Hodges. But accompanying those new opportunities will be additional competition, which Hodges and his team plan to stay ahead of. “We’re going to need more facilities, trucks, office space – and certainly a lot more people,” Hodges says.

In addition to its obvious economic impact, the Carolina Connector will yield environmental benefits, eliminating the equivalent of 270,000 truck trips from the roads per year. That will reduce annual CO2 emissions by 655,000 tons, according to CSX estimates.

Sustainability meshes well with Crown LSP’s mission. Its operations are certified through the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency’s (EPA) Smartway program. As such, the company benchmarks emissions, fuel efficiency and other operational standards in accordance with nationwide best practices. “A lot of our customers prefer to work with Smartway carriers,” Hodges says.

High standards mean finding and retaining well-trained employees. Crown LSP works with Nash Community College and Edgecombe Community College to tap newly minted logistics graduates. “We communicate with NCC and ECC to post openings on their job boards, and we’ve gotten good candidates from there,” Hodges says. One recent Crown new-hire holds a master’s degree from East Carolina University’s logistics program, and this summer the company will host an intern from North Carolina State University’s supply-chain management program.

“We anticipate working with the business school at North Carolina Wesleyan, too,” Hodges says. The move is expected to round out Crown’s links to local educational institutions as it eyes future growth. “I see all these programs becoming more and more important to us,” he says.