

# 30 years of infrastructure

## Leelanau's Larry Fleis ends productive engineering career

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TRAVERSE CITY — For someone known to many Northern Michigan residents as the leader of a popular polka band, Leelanau County native Larry Fleis also carved out an amazing legacy building the infrastructure of communities across Michigan and beyond.

Fleis recently stepped down as chairman of the board of Fleis & VandenBrink Companies Inc., 30 years after launching a two-man engineering office with former business partner Steve Vanden Brink. Three decades later, Fleis is leaving a firm that he's grown to include nearly 300 employees across nine offices in Michigan and Indiana, more than 50 operational locations and generating more than \$50 million in annual revenue.

"I've thoroughly enjoyed working closely with the principals, our executive team and our employees to achieve our strategic goals,"



Fleis



DeVol

Fleis said. "Together we've built an incredible company... you hire good people and you empower them — that's been the key to our success."

Fleis grew up in Cedar where his family name is well-known. He

graduated from Glen Lake Community Schools in 1969 and spent two years at Northwestern Michigan College before he went to Michigan State University for his engineering degree. He worked as an engineer in the Grand Rapids area for several years where he met Vanden Brink, who left the firm in 2015 because of health issues and died in 2021.

"We worked together and got to know each other, and we just decided we'd start out on our own," Fleis said.

The partners found a niche by focusing on small and mid-size com-

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munities in western Michigan that needed help in building out their local infrastructure including municipal water and sewer systems. Most of their clients weren't large enough to have their own engineering and maintenance departments, so their relationships continued in the ongoing operations and maintenance of the utility systems they designed and built.

"In a lot of ways it's like someone hiring a doctor or lawyer — if they're happy with their services, they don't change," he said. "If you treat people fairly and give them good service, they're going to stick with you."

Fleis & VandenBrink completed dozens of projects around Northern Michigan over the years, including the Leland Township sewer project and the water system at private Northport Point. The firm was also hired this summer to help design major upgrades to Traverse City wastewater treatment plant, and recently secured a contract for development of an \$81 million wastewater treatment system on Mackinac Island.

Early in his engineering career, Fleis also stayed busy playing in his family polka band based in Leelanau County known as Larry and His Larks. It included his wife Jackie, his sister Noreen and her husband and family friend Bob Atkinson. The band traveled to performances across Michigan, Ohio, Indiana and Wisconsin, and as far away as Florida and Hawaii. Growing family and professional obligations eventually cut back their schedule, but the group still performs occasionally. It headlined the annual Cedar Polka Fest back in 2019, and performed at the festival's traditional Polka Mass this summer. Fleis said the band

has also been invited to play at next year's festival.

Fleis and his family also continue to give back to the community in other ways. He and his brother Ted started the Ed & Irene Fleis Education Fund back in 2006 in honor of their parents. It provides higher education scholarships for students in Leelanau County or those with family ties to the county. Next year's funding cycle will bring the total of scholarships awarded to over \$750,000 assisting more than 400 students.

"It started out as a 50-50 drawing when our mother passed away," said Fleis. It's now supported by an annual golf outing, an on-line auction and individual donations. "It's just kept growing and growing — way beyond our expectations."

Fleis & VandenBrink's operations have evolved in a three-tier operation that includes the engineering firm, a facilities management division that operates public and private water and sewer plants, and a construction management company. Its growth has attracted numerous accolades including being named one of the top 100 growth firms in the U.S. and Canada, and as one of "Best & Brightest Companies to Work For" both in Michigan and the U.S.

Going forward, another FVCI veteran with Northern Michigan ties will step in to Fleis' shoes. John DeVol, President of Fleis & VandenBrink who works out of the firm's Traverse City office, will replace Fleis as the chairman of the board for the company. Fleis will continue to share time between his home in Ada and a seasonal residence on South Lake Leelanau and do some consulting for the firm.

"Larry helped lay a solid foundation of positive culture, relationships, business principals and technical excellence that has allowed our firm to reach new heights," DeVol said.