

Handrail maker to grow
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A Lancaster County-based handrail manufacturer is expanding in West Hempfield Township following a period of rapid growth.

Construction is set to begin this month on Handrail Design Inc.'s 30,000-square-foot building along Continental Drive near Route 30. It will include room for a 25,000-square-foot addition, expected to be built within two to three years. Handrail Design's current 17,000-square-foot home is on Corporate Boulevard in West Hempfield Township.

The expansion comes after four years of substantial growth for Handrail Design. Established in 2002, the firm's staff has grown from eight to 50. Its revenue has jumped from slightly more than \$3 million in 2003 to \$8 million last year.

"We simply ran out of space," said Kevin Downs, Handrail Design's president.

In 1989, German architectural hardware company HEWI transferred Downs from its operations in the United Kingdom to a plant in the U.S. When the company closed its Lancaster plant in 2002, Downs bought the design and manufacturing rights to several of HEWI's products and started his own company.

Handrail Design devises, manufactures, sells and installs railing systems for libraries, corporate offices, mansions, hospitals and other facilities. The systems commonly are used along stairwells and edges of balcony areas. In late 2005, the company introduced a line of pull handles for doors.

About 40 employees work at the company's facility in Lancaster County. The company also has sales and installation staff on the West and East coasts and in the Midwest.

The company's fast growth has presented some challenges. One is trying to find enough competent employees. So far, the firm has been able to find employees in Lancaster and York counties and hasn't had to resort to recruiting in a larger area, Downs said.

HDI also struggled to find a site suitable for its new home. The site in West Hempfield Township was one of the only ones in the county that had enough land to accommodate the firm's needs, Downs said. He considered renovating an existing building but found it would cost almost as much as building a new one. The building is expected to cost \$2 million, and Downs estimated the future expansion could cost about \$1 million.

"It made more sense to start out with a blank piece of paper," he said.

The firm's decision to stay in West Hempfield Township is good news for the municipality. A construction boom a few years ago has been followed by a lull in residential and commercial development in the municipality, said Jonathan Heilman, who handles planning and zoning for the township.

"Things have been relatively slow," he said. Heilman could not point to specific reasons for the slowdown.

Handrail Design expects to move into its new home in June or July. Downs estimates that the firm's number of employees will continue to grow between 15 percent and 20 percent during the next year or two. Revenues are expected to reach between \$8 million and \$10 million this year.

As it grows physically, the firm also plans to expand its product line. It wants to get more involved in products that help aging baby boomers, such as grab bars and tub seats, Downs said.