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monday profile: d.s. saxena

Engineer Constructed His Career on Solid Ground

By [Eric Pera](#)
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LAKELAND Few people give dirt its due. D.S. Saxena is an exception. He's a geotechnical engineer, a soil specialist who helps developers determine the makeup of the ground they intend to build on, and how to engineer a solid foundation.

Nature recycles rocks into the stuff underfoot, often a shifting amalgam of sand, clay and other materials.

If you're going to build a bell tower, say, in Italy, you don't want it to lean.

Saxena, 63, has invested a lifetime in the science of soils, turning an affinity for geology into a multimillion-dollar business.

His Lakeland-based consulting business, ASC Geosciences, employs 80 people and had \$6 million in billings last year.

The company has branch offices in Fort Myers, Jacksonville, Lake City, Naples, Panama City and Atlanta.

Saxena, who uses the nickname Sax, has left much of the operation to his two sons, Anu and Jay, leaving him time to concentrate on especially challenging projects that require his expertise in soil mechanics.

The firm also specializes in the broader field of environmental engineering, which incorporates other elements such as water and air.

But Saxena is most fascinated with dirt, in all its compositional complexities. He has built a reputation for his solid appraisals and for adopting the appropriate engineering necessary to fit the project to the land.

"We've used him a lot, he's the best around," said Joe Ruthven, a Lakeland developer who has employed Saxena's firm on a variety of projects. "He's done a tremendous job of expanding and growing his business."

Architects working for the University of South Florida employed Saxena in the university's search for a new Lakeland campus.

ASC studied soil samples and tested for sinkholes and radon at each of the five sites under consideration before a search committee settled on a location at Interstate 4 and the Polk Parkway.

GOOD REPUTATION

Saxena's firm currently is working on a project at Lakeland Regional Medical Center, which is adding a 300-bed wing.

The weight of the nine-story tower rests on Saxena's reputation, which merits praise from some of his peers.

"He's a great engineer, he has tremendous knowledge," said Harish Shah of the Jacobs Engineering Group in Lakeland, who befriended Saxena in 1969, when both men moved here.

"He's written several geotechnical papers and has presented them at (industry) meetings," Shah said.



D.S. "Sax" Saxena, president and CEO of ASC Geosciences, has turned his knowledge of geology into a multimillion-dollar business. His company's headquarters is on Lake Wire in Lakeland. MICHAEL WILSON/The Ledger

Other Saxena projects in recent years include the Turkey Point Nuclear Power Plant near Homestead, the World Marriott Resort at Lake Buena Vista and more than a dozen airport improvement jobs throughout the state, including Lakeland, Bartow and Winter Haven.

His first job fresh out of the master's program at the Technical University of Nova Scotia, now called DalTech at Dalhousie University, took him to Orlando, where he took soil samples during the earliest stages of Walt Disney World.

"Sax is pretty dedicated to what he does," said David Luft, a senior engineering consultant and former president of The Walter Fedy Group in Lakeland, who worked with Saxena on the USF site project.

"I think of how he has grown that firm into what it is today. That takes a lot of work and a high code of ethics," an important trait, Luft said, because "we're dealing with public safety."

WORKING IN LAKELAND

As a measure of Saxena's success, he has purchased a threelevel building on Lake Wire, former home of the Lakeland Police Department. The top floor serves as ASC's headquarters, and the rest of the building is being refurbished for lease.

A visit to Saxena's office is a most civil experience.

Guests are offered coffee or tea, the latter being the host's favorite, served with milk and sugar.

The minimal, wood furnishings are in harmony with a decor of brushed aluminum and stainless steel, reflecting a modernist's tastes in architectural design.

His courtly manner is perhaps a vestige of his Hinduism. Born in Allahabad, a city of approximately 1 million in North Central India, Saxena emigrated to America by way of Nova Scotia, where he studied engineering.

Canada's climate was not to his liking, which may explain his proclivity for wearing sweater vests, even in balmy weather.

From his corporate perch Saxena can view one of the city's more pastoral scenes -- Lake Wire and its burgeoning stock of swans and other birds. He speaks of Lakeland with reverence. It fits his persona -- dynamic yet laid-back and family friendly.

Lately he has taken to philanthropy to compensate the community and his adopted country for his good fortune of the past 20 years since setting up his own business out of his home garage.

The Saxena Family Foundation supports a variety of good causes, such as the children's wing at Lakeland Regional Medical Center, and a USF lecture series.

"I would not trade Lakeland for any other city in the nation," Saxena said. "It's a great place to raise a family."

SCIENTIFIC BACKGROUND

Dhirendra Swarup Saxena was born June 11, 1940, to parents Omwapi Devi, a homemaker, and Mahesh Saxena, a civil servant who made the English language a priority in his modest household in a city at the junction of the Ganges and Yamuna rivers.

One of Saxena's earliest memories is of being awakened by his father at 4 a.m. to be tutored in English grammar, along with his three sisters and brother.

The early hour was necessary so that Mahesh Saxena could arrive at work by 7 a.m.

"It was important to him," Saxena said. "We were not very rich . . . But he would make sure his children had the best education."

The family enjoyed a middleclass existence in Allahabad, one of India's holiest cities and site of the Kumbha Mela, a Hindu festival held every 12 years in which millions bathe in the Ganges to purify sins.

As a youth, Sax Saxena was enthralled with science, which he balanced with other passions such as cricket and table tennis.

At 17, he entered an academic competition and won a coveted seat at the Indian Institute of Technology during its inaugural year, 1959.

Approximately 22,000 students took the entrance exam at a school with room for only 400, all of whom received free tuition, room and board, said Saxena's older son, Anu.

"It gave him the confidence that he really could achieve his dreams."

Saxena graduated from ITT in 1962 and for the next four years worked at an Indian industrial plant, but it wasn't to his liking. So he applied for and received a full scholarship at the Technical University of Nova Scotia.

Married, he left his wife and Anu, then not quite 2, and studied in Canada, completing a master's degree in geotechnical engineering in one year.

His family soon joined him and they left for Orlando, where Saxena's new employer, a Canadian engineering firm, had been selected by Disney to do preliminary work on its new theme park.

In 1968, after acquiring immigrant status, Saxena took a job with IMC Phosphates in Bartow. From there his career took him to Houston, where he helped design an offshore drilling platform.

A few years later Saxena returned to the Lakeland area, joining Harlan Engineering Laboratories.

He became an American citizen in 1978. "It was a very easy test," Saxena said, smiling.

In 1980 he left as Harlan's president to work as operations manager for AT&E consultants, returning again to Lakeland in 1984 to open his own consulting firm.

"I had butterflies in my stomach as to how I would be received as a foreigner, and if I would make it," Saxena said. "It was a very humbling feeling.

"The only place where you can be what you want to be, where the only requirement is to be hardworking, is America."

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