



Jon Langham/Photo Chief

Steve Zoller and Arden Swanson, partners in Zoller, Swanson and Co. CPAs, joined forces seven years ago after recognizing one another's complimentary skills.

CPAs reap rewards of teamwork

BY CHRIS LAFORTUNE
STAFF WRITER

Certified Public Accountants Steven Zoller and Arden Swanson and have doubled the size of their Oak Park practice since joining forces seven years ago.

Swanson had been working out of his home basement and Zoller, already on Marion Street, had been practicing on his own since 1979. He was looking for a partner to help shoulder the work.

"It's good to team up with good people," Zoller said. And, he and Swanson have complimentary sets of skills.

"Steve did retirement planning in addition to 1040 work," Swanson said. "I had a lot of 1040 work and I enjoyed business accounting and business taxes. It looked like we could serve a lot of people and cover a lot of bases working all together."

The partners started with a staff of five. Zoller, Swanson and Co. CPAs at 137 N. Oak Park Ave. now has nine year-round employees and more than 250 business clients. With 1,000 tax customers, the staff doubles during tax season.

Swanson started on his own with maybe a half dozen clients, and Zoller had about 50 when he moved from Chicago to Oak Park in 1982.

"We've always known we could be as big as we want to be," Zoller said.

The partners moved their practice to Oak Park Avenue in August 2004, nearly doubling their office space. Zoller had been located on Marion for 23 years.

Village home

Last summer, the two stepped back from negotiations to acquire a Wheaton-based practice. The partners earlier bought out two other practices, both unsolicited purchases.

The Wheaton buy would have again doubled the firm's size, Zoller said, but the partners concluded it might pull them out of Oak Park more than they wanted.

"Oak Park is kind of our home," Zoller said.

Zoller and Swanson began their careers outside the village. Swanson, of Oak Park, started in a public accounting firm in Chicago doing audits, receiving his CPA in 1984. He went independent five years later.

"I always liked the idea of being independent," Swanson said. "I was doing a little moonlighting here and there, and it started growing to the point that I could almost live off of it."

Zoller, of River Forest, has been an accountant for 35 years. He started his career in Southfield, Mich., before coming to Chicago in 1979 to be closer to family.

A professor at the University of Illi-

nois in Chicago suggested Zoller become an accountant, he said.

"He told me that I may not be doing all the homework, but he knew I had a knack for the profession," Zoller recalled.

Estates, investments

The firm does more than serve clients' accounting and tax needs. It also handles and advises on estate planning and investments.

"Financial things are so complicated, it's no longer possible not to get involved in these things," Zoller said.

Tom Coffey of River Forest has been a Zoller client for the past decade, using his full range of services.

"The advice that Steve has given us has consistently been proven, in time, to be very sound, and we trust him," Coffey said. "He's a very good man."

Coffey had been disappointed with his accountant at the time, and Zoller was recommended by a neighbor. Since then, Coffey has referred his son, daughter and other relatives to Zoller.

"I would recommend him without any hesitation or second thoughts for any accounting function that someone might have," Coffey said. "He deserves it."

Mary Eifrig of Oak Park has been a tax client of Swanson's for about 10 years.

"It's been a real pleasure for me to see how successful he's been," she said.

"By now, he knows my situation so well, and it's so slick," she added. "I hear other people who spend so much time. I don't have any of that with him. He gets right to the point."

Satisfying

Helping people is the most satisfying part of his job, Swanson said. Some clients have financial issues that are a burden to them.

"If we do a bit to ease their mind on tax issues and financial planning issues, it feels good," he said.

Swanson said he has enjoyed watching his staff's professional growth. Some came in with extensive education and experience, he said, while others have learned along the way.

"No one is in the same place they were when they came," he said. "It's fun to watch that development take place."

And, Swanson added, he looks forward to the firm's growth under its next generation. Neither man has any plans to stop working, but Zoller said he doesn't mind training people to eventually replace him.

"They'll service a whole bunch of people we don't even know yet," Zoller said. "It's not just a product. It's something big that you can't define, really."