

Mover is planted downtown

A company that transports plants around the country fits easily in an unexpected St. Petersburg location.

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ST. PETERSBURG - It is difficult to see how a national company that moves acres of plants in thousands of trucks could have its headquarters downtown near Williams Park.

No room exists for that kind of operation in the rim of businesses around the park. Interstate Transport Inc. not only is established at 324 First Ave. N, it is expanding. In a few years, it may even need another building.

The plant transport company fits in a small space downtown because it does not own any trucks or plants. It is a broker that arranges transport of plants from growers in Florida fields to retailers all over the country.

Nearly hidden from the public in its second-floor home, Interstate has a broad reach due in part to a contract with Home Depot, said Tim J. Higham, chief executive officer of the company that was formed in 2002.

Interstate deals with 22 different carriers and hundreds of growers. It moves 10,000 shipments per year. Its busiest time is March 1 to June 1, when 65 percent of business is done.

"Three years ago, we had revenue between \$2-million and \$3-million. Last year it was \$15-million. This year we expect it to be between \$25-million and \$30-million," said Higham, who is from Blackburn, England, which is about 30 miles from Liverpool.

The company has 21 employees and a second office in Atlanta. Higham, 37, says it is debt free. The expansion now under way will add 10 to 20 people this year in jobs in dispatch, administration and software networking.

Interstate is creating two new divisions, one of which deals with the hundreds of small loads that need to be shipped but don't fill a 48-foot truck. Interstate will consolidate them. A software division is in the future, too.

Interstate just struck a deal with EZ Shipper Racks to return the racks that carry plants to Florida growers after shipments are dropped off at retailers such as Home Depot. Growers rent the racks. "As we continue to grow, we're going to need another building soon," Higham said.

The company grew out of his expertise in software and his wife's knowledge of the plant business. Gloria Hudson Higham owned a palm tree nursery in Ellenton and told her future husband when they first met that her biggest problem was the transportation component, Higham said.

That got him thinking about plants and transport and how to start the next part of his life.

Higham financed Interstate from millions he made when in 1998 he sold a software company he created. He owned 50 percent of that company.

Interstate was located in the West Shore district of Tampa until last year. In searching for new quarters, the Highams decided they wanted to be in downtown St. Petersburg.

"In my opinion, it is the jewel of the Tampa Bay area," Higham said. "You are surrounded on three sides by water."

A broker found the First Avenue site, across from Williams Park in an area that has not yet fully benefited from the redevelopment downtown.

Higham was aghast when he first saw the old rooming place.

"It was a mess," he said. "The upstairs had been completely gutted. There were vermin, all kinds of ants and termites, old jalousie windows and gaps in the walls."

His wife could see beyond the nastiness.

"This is perfect," she told him.

They bought it for \$416,000. He believed they overpaid.

When the Highams moved in, the Christian Science Reading Room was on the bottom floor. Interstate needed the room, which now is being built into offices for the two new divisions and a future software division.

Higham said the company spent about \$300,000 renovating the top floor, which is 4,000 square feet. It has nine glass offices, two large dispatch rooms and rooms for temporary workers. Another \$50,000 will be spent on the ground floor space.

No longer does he believe the company paid too much for its downtown site. He mentions the probable location nearby of a new office tower for Progress Energy and the overall renaissance of downtown St. Petersburg.



Tim Higham walks down the main corridor in his corporate center in downtown St. Petersburg. The wood floors were reconditioned from the old building.