

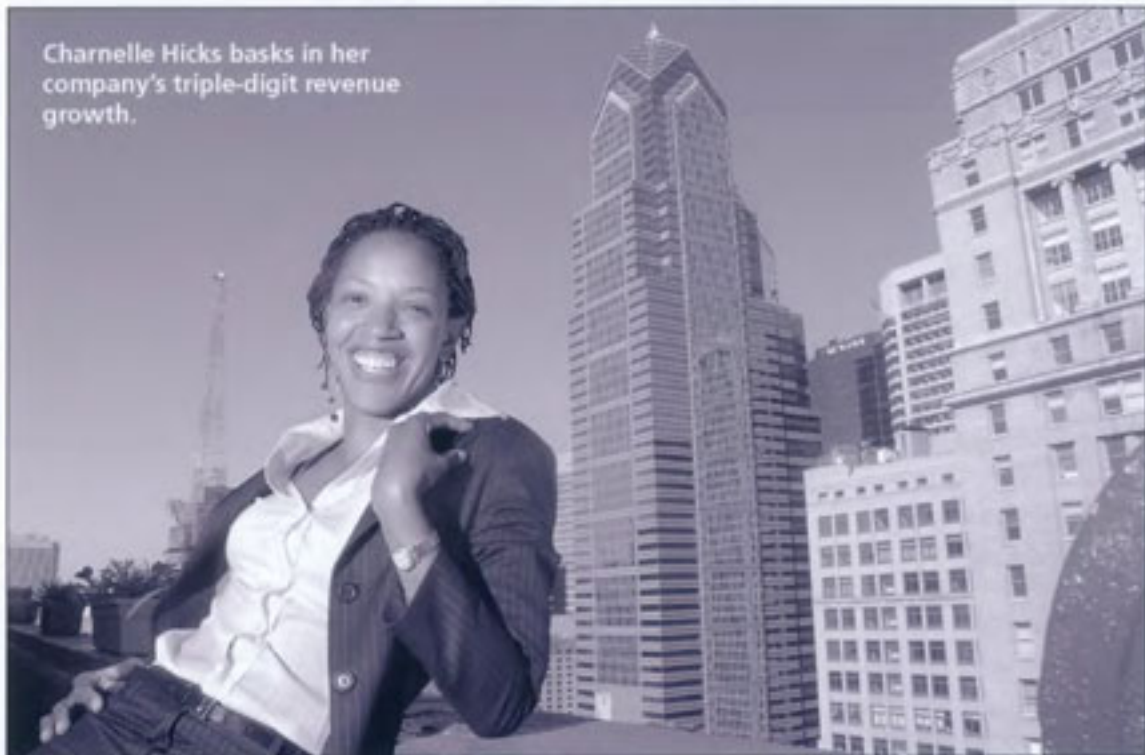
# PHILADELPHIA BUSINESS JOURNAL



**No. 40 | CHPlanning Ltd.**

## Urban planner strives to engage all project stakeholders

Charnelle Hicks basks in her company's triple-digit revenue growth.



**JON HURDLE**

SPECIAL TO THE BUSINESS JOURNAL

**A**ny business with a growth rate of more than 200 percent over the past two years must be doing something right, and in the case of CHPlanning Ltd., it's primarily because it has distinguished itself from the competition by taking a consultative approach with its clients in an industry

where the urban planning process isn't always a two-way street.

The Philadelphia-based firm emphasizes an inclusive approach so that the final plan truly reflects the wishes of the client as well as the expertise of the planner. The company's planning services cover land use, urban planning, neighborhood revitalization, environmental studies, transportation studies, parks and open spaces, and airports, primarily in Pennsylvania,

New Jersey and Delaware.

"Working with our clients to succeed together, we have been able to retain our clients as well as adding new ones, and that's important when you're starting out," said President and Founder Charnelle Hicks. "As a newer entity, we have to consider clients as partners."

Hicks' consultative approach helped the seven-year-old company post revenue of \$923,000 last year, earning it a place at No. 40

on the Philadelphia 100 list of fastest-growing companies.

More established firms are more able to trade on their reputation, but that's a luxury that CHPlanning doesn't yet have, Hicks said.

"Others have established a reputation over a long enough period of time that some level of client involvement isn't expected," she said.

The professional qualifications held by CHPlanning's 12 staff members don't absolve them of the need to work closely with clients, Hicks said. "Our staff have master's degrees and professional planning qualifications, but we still want to incorporate our clients' views."

Revenue has grown from around \$50,000 in the first 12 months of operation, starting in 1999, to \$922,893 last year. Since 2003, the company has grown 205 percent.

Recent clients include the City of Chester, where CHPlanning submitted plans for three

sections of the overall city plan, including a public park to commemorate the life of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., who attended seminary school in Chester. A native of the segregated South, King discovered in Chester that it was possible to live a racially integrated life, and that helped him to decide to become a civil rights activist rather than a pastor when he graduated from seminary school, said Hicks, who is black.

In recognition of the importance of Chester to King's development, CHPlanning consulted with up to 100 members of the local community and then proposed a park with a rose garden memorial to the civil rights leader and a "passive" code for visitors that encourages contemplation rather than active pursuits such as sports.

Some members of a local labor union felt so moved by the park proposal that they volunteered their labor to construct it, Hicks said.

Chester, like some other former manufacturing cities in the Northeast, has suffered from a loss of industrial jobs, and its infrastructure has declined as its tax base has shrunk.

"Chester, Camden and the old industrial parts of Philadelphia suffered terribly from depopulation, disinvestment and a loss of industry," Hicks said. "My business is working with these communities to facilitate urban revitalization

## UP CLOSE

**COMPANY:** CHPlanning Ltd.

**CEO:** Charnelle Hicks

**YEAR FOUNDED:** 2001

**STARTUP CAPITAL:** \$75

**2005 SALES:** \$922,893

**2005 EMPLOYEES:** 12

**2003-2005 GROWTH RATE:** 205 percent

and rural preservation, and it's working."

One result is the Chester Waterfront Plan, now completed, in which CHPlanning aimed to balance the opportunities offered by vacant land with the needs of older communities.

Among other recent projects is the Yeadon Shopping Center Redevelopment Plan, in which CHPlanning is the lead consultant to Yeadon Borough for the redevelopment of a blighted shopping center. The project begins with an assessment of the state of the center, and will then examine options for its reuse and redevelopment.

In Quakertown, CHPlanning worked with local businesses to create a marketing and redevelopment strategy for the town's central business corridor. The project includes directing consultation with the public and helping to develop public-private partnerships to promote the redevelopment.

In addition to seeking community input to its planning process, CHPlanning has an environmental agenda that avoids any planning that would contribute to sprawl, and ensures that it will seek to redevelop "brownfield" locations rather than building on previously undeveloped sites.

"If there's a large developer tearing up farms, we don't want to participate," Hicks said.

Green awareness has also influenced the company's contribution to an environmental impact statement for the proposed expansion of the Philadelphia International Airport. Among its recommendations was the installation of so-called pervious pavements which allow rainwater to seep into the underlying soil rather than becoming runoff that collects more pollutants and so requires more purification before being returned to the main water supply.

Developers are becoming more receptive to environmental enhancements in the planning process, said Hicks. "Some developers that were exclusively doing green field sites are now infilling" on previously developed locations, she said.

A similar principle is at work on the Baltimore Avenue Corridor project — between West Philadelphia and Lansdowne — where CHPlanning is working with the Delaware Valley Regional

Planning Commission to revitalize a previously lively commercial center.

The company recommended focusing new development around existing rail stations to encourage increased use of public transportation, for example.

In another transportation-related project, the company was hired by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania to develop a model land-use ordinance that will help the state's towns and cities incorporate transportation infrastructure into planning, zoning and permitting decisions. The Pennsylvania Department of Transportation selected CHPlanning for the project as part of its initiative to work more closely with municipalities under new land-use planning regulations.

On the basis of its local success, CHPlanning is now reaching out to other areas of the country, notably to New Orleans, where it was recently selected from among some 70 bidding companies to plan for the rebuilding of a neighborhood damaged in Hurricane Katrina.

The New Orleans project, whose first draft is due by the end of the year, represents a breakthrough for the company and a sign of its strong potential for future growth, Hicks said.

"It's a real endorsement of what we are doing," she said.

The growing business has allowed Hicks, who owns all of the company stock, to improve working conditions and incentives for employees. It has also increased the attractiveness of the company for potential future hires.

In the beginning, it was hard to find the right staff because there were no health benefits and applicants were unsure that the startup company would even survive, Hicks said. Now, the company provides benefits, has good office space and is attracting more potential employees. Hicks said she has received around 50 résumés in the past year. She plans to double the payroll to around 25 employees in the next couple of years.

Hicks, 40, shared in the early hardship since she was unable to pay herself a salary in the first couple of years. Her experience since getting a master's degree in urban and regional planning from the University of North Carolina includes two and a half years as a planner with the transport engineering firm Parsons Brinckerhoff, and a stint as a management consultant with PricewaterhouseCoopers.

She declined to disclose the company's latest profits but said they are largely plowed back into the business to fund things like staff development. "We are still in a pretty heavy investment mode," she said. "I'm in this for the long haul — there's not a lot of profit taking." ■

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**Charnelle Hicks**  
CHPlanning Ltd.