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New Prairie Construction Becomes Worker-Owned Cooperative

URBANA, IL, August 1, 2018 - New Prairie Construction Company, a full-service, insured general contractor and solar panel installer in Urbana, Illinois, transitioned into a worker cooperative this August. Twelve worker-owners now own 100% of the company that also employs them. This day marked the beginning of the next chapter for the 30-year-old company, which has had only two owners since its founding in 1988. New Prairie also recently opened a Solar Division to underscore its commitment to environmental responsibility.

New Prairie Construction's transition story began in 2016, when co-founders Jill Mulder and Julie Birdwell were considering their long-term plans for the business and themselves. "We investigated many options for succession, including selling to a third party. But these options had significant disadvantages, especially for the employees," said Birdwell. "We decided to pursue a worker-owned cooperative, because this option provided the best opportunity for employees to remain working in their respective positions for the long term."

Mulder and Birdwell brought in The ICA Group, the country's leading expert on worker ownership and the oldest national organization dedicated to the development of worker cooperatives, for a discussion about becoming worker-owned as a succession strategy. They found employee ownership to be a promising exit strategy that aligned both their retirement and legacy goals for the company, including keeping New Prairie in the local community for generations to come. "A worker-owned cooperative ensures that the values New Prairie Construction is known for— quality craftsmanship, great customer service, environmental responsibility, and service to and investment in the community—can continue into the future," says Birdwell.

While Birdwell is staying on with the company as President, she will no longer own 50% of the company. Instead, she will be an *equal* owner with the company's eleven other worker-owners. New Prairie worked with The ICA Group to determine a fair share price. Employees met with each other to establish the company's democratic governance structure, with the new worker-owners

electing and serving on the board of directors. “New Prairie Construction’s transition to worker ownership is an example of a new way of approaching economic development that keeps local businesses and jobs in the community, strengthening the local economy,” says David Hammer, Executive Director of the ICA Group.

New worker-owner Jennifer Hansen says the team is feeling excited and confident about the transition to a worker-owned cooperative: “Over my thirteen years of working here, I’ve seen the owners and our crew repeatedly come up with some pretty inventive, smart and interesting solutions to a variety of issues out in the field and in the office. I think transitioning to a worker cooperative is simply a continuation of that.”

New Prairie Construction is a full-service, insured general contractor and solar panel installer serving the Champaign-Urbana, IL area since 1988. We recently opened our Solar Division to demonstrate our commitment to environmental responsibility. Today, our work encompasses additions of all sizes, kitchen and bathroom remodels, porches and decks, home energy efficiency, solar panel installation, and numerous specialty projects. We integrate technically advanced products with traditional materials and techniques. Continuing education keeps our crew on top of lead safety methods, best practices in remodeling, and green building innovations. New Prairie’s commitment to customer service, communication, and accommodation has earned us a long list of satisfied and repeat customers.

The ICA Group, Inc. is the country’s leading expert on worker ownership and the oldest national organization dedicated to the development of worker cooperatives. We are a mission-driven non-profit that brings in-depth business analysis and rigor to the worker ownership sector. We combine this with a deep understanding of worker ownership and other worker-centered structures, and a commitment to serving low-wage workers and communities of color.

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