

SW Fla. construction firm gains Central American partner

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GATES is going global.

The construction company has signed a partnership agreement with Panama-based COCIGE, one of the largest construction companies in Central America with 3,000 employees.

The partnership will serve as a bridge for U.S. and European companies wanting to locate and expand in Central America. It will go by the name COCIGE — GATES.

The partnership will open an office in Panama on Sept. 1. It will

share the office with a Miami-based architectural firm.

"We already have four projects lined up. We expect to have many more," said Todd Gates, chairman and a principal in GATES, headquartered in North Naples.

After the market turned in Florida, Gates got out a map and started looking for development opportunities elsewhere. In the last year, he's done a lot of traveling in Central America.

The partnership is a way to keep his company growing and to protect the more than 100 jobs it provides in Southwest Florida, he said.

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"The Florida market is really tough now," Gates said. "So it's a good time to diversify our business."

Gates chose to locate in Panama because it's the second-largest free trade zone in the world, next to Hong Kong, and it's seeing a lot of growth.

"Now is the time to do it," said Ricardo Fabrega, president of CO-

CIGE. "Panama is booming."

During a press conference Tuesday, he said he had the "know who," referring to his contacts in Central America, and Gates had the "know how" to make the partnership work. Projects will include resort communities and hotels.

The partnership also expects to bring business from Central America to the U.S.

Florida Sen. Mel Martinez came to Naples for Tuesday's announcement.

"It's good for Florida," the GOP

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senator said of the partnership. "It's good for America. But it's also good for Latin America."

He said he couldn't stress enough how important it is in the global economy for Central America to be successful. Congress is considering a free trade agreement with Panama that would lift barriers and encourage more trade with the U.S.

Martinez supports it. He said it will only encourage more partnerships like the one between GATES and COCIGE. According to the U.S. Trade Representative's Web site, bi-

lateral trade between the U.S. and Panama in 2003 totaled \$2.1 billion, with U.S. exports accounting for about \$1.8 billion. In 2002 and 2003, U.S. exports to Panama grew by more than 30 percent and almost half of Panama's imports come from the U.S.

Currently, there are close to \$10 billion in projects that are developing and approved in Panama, and that doesn't include another \$5 billion of work in the Panama Canal, Fabrega said.

State Rep. Garrett Richter, R-Naples, said it's entrepreneurship that fosters economic development, and he congratulated Gates for his vision. Recently, Gulf Coast Business Review named Gates

the 2007 Entrepreneur of the Year.

"I often say there is only one way to get a reputation and that is to earn it," he said.

"Companies need to be about mission, not about individuals," Richter said.

Dick Grant, chairman of the Economic Development Council of Collier County, called the partnership a "significant accomplishment."

The council works to attract and grow high-wage jobs in the county. He said existing companies can help diversify the economy just as much as new companies through expansion.

Mike Reagen, president of the Greater Naples Chamber of Commerce, expects the part-

nership to open other doors for local companies. He's hoping to develop a relationship with the American Chamber in Panama and ride the coattails of the new venture.

GATES offers construction, development and real estate services and has offices in Collier, Lee and Charlotte counties.

In 2006, the company merged with D'Alessandro & Woodyard real estate. Since the merger, the company has grown dramatically.

In 2007, Southeast Construction magazine recognized the company as a top contractor, and Gulf Coast Business Review ranked the firm second in a list of the Top 50 contractors from Tampa to Naples.