

Advanced Lining Enters New Territory to Offer Coating and Lining Services

June 21, 2021



Technician Austin Huggins installs a liner inside a new manhole in Park City.

Looks like you arrived here from one of our emails! If you want uninterrupted access to our content, [create an account here for free!](#) Already have an account? [Login here!](#)

When Advanced Pump and Equipment was tasked to help a longtime client with the rehabilitation of a structure they had been servicing, the family-run business saw an opportunity to open a new trenchless division to answer the call and fill the void for specialized rehabilitation services in the region.

The new division, Advanced Lining LLC, now provides protective and rehabilitative coatings and lining services to its growing base of clients in Utah, Idaho, Wyoming, Montana and Nevada.

Lift station rehab

Advanced Pump and Equipment had been asked to rehabilitate a self-priming lift station for the city of Belgrade, Montana, while retrofitting its submersible pumps. The structure was critical and in an area that would have been extremely difficult to excavate around, so Belgrade wanted to have it lined with something that would last “forever” — or at least extend the lift station’s life cycle another four to five decades.

Unfamiliar with the process of spray-applied linings and coatings, Advanced Pump and Equipment began the quest to find a local contractor who could perform the rehabilitation service and learned that the closest suitable vendor was based out of Denver. They moved forward and arranged for the work to be done to help their client but recognized that there was a void and need for support in their territory for this type of trenchless rehab work.

Advanced Pump and Equipment is owned by three brothers: Matt, Andrew and Seth Huggins. Seth had a long-term background in corporate America, primarily in sales, so his brothers tapped him to take point to set up and operate a new division for the company that would focus solely on providing trenchless technology.

The decision was made to focus on coatings and linings initially and Seth set out to find the right vendor who could support them on this new venture. The Huggins brothers decided that the best route would be to work with a single vendor who could supply a wide variety of products and equipment to streamline training and support since they would be truly “newbies” in the field. They settled on OBIC LLC of Dublin, Ohio, and signed on to become a licensee to handle the territories in and around the Rocky Mountain region.

They acquired a 2005 18-wheel Freightliner semitruck to house the spray equipment. The rig was customized by OBIC and outfitted with an array of support equipment that included holding tanks, a pressure washer, generator, Graco proportioners and spray equipment. With this rig and a product range that include polyureas, polyurethanes, foams, epoxies and grouts, Advanced Lining is capable of rehabilitating and extending the life of a wide variety of water, wastewater and industrial structures.

Creating awareness

Although one project had spurred the opening of the division, Seth Huggins realized that trenchless technology, although utilized for several decades, was not a common practice in his region and so market education would be essential to make the venture a success. The firm has an outside sales force to connect with municipalities and private sector asset owners, and they have heavily invested in their online presence, utilizing a digital marketing firm for their search engine optimization and digital footprint.

“We have multiple social media aspects or channels that we use to promote, but where we see the most success and spend most of our time is word-of-mouth and of course lunch-and-learn field demos,” Huggins says.

Although COVID-19 has impacted their marketing practices and limited their ability to have face-to-face conversations with engineers and municipalities, they have found a way to shift their efforts and have engaged in more Zoom video conference calls and being more active on social media. Luckily, due to the outdoor nature of the activity, they have been able to continue conducting some lunch-and-learns with proper social distancing practices and making everyone safe and comfortable. “Once our prospects see it applied, it really does sell itself and we’ve noticed that at demos, prospects do really have an almost visceral reaction to what they see and the before and after difference,” Huggins says.

They also utilized existing relationships with public works directors and engineers to whom they provided services and equipment through their sister company. The two entities have found that they are able to help generate work and leads for each other.

Overall Huggins has felt that his biggest challenge has been the simple lack of product knowledge and brand awareness of their solution, and along with being a new trenchless contractor within the territory. Next to that, bringing the crews up to speed on application proficiency and product understanding has been time consuming. They have been lucky: in several areas, they have been approved as an applicator and their products approved or spec’d for use. Getting to this point can sometimes be a lengthy process because as a new entity, they needed to build a trust factor and prove that they could deliver on their promises.

“We found that by offering a demo to those skeptical asset owners, to line a manhole for them at no cost, gave us an opportunity to showcase what we could do,” Huggins says. “Of course, sometimes when we offer this, they will try to pick a structure that is in the worst condition possible, but our crews always rise to the challenge and are able to get that prospect to give us serious consideration for future work after they witness the demo.”

Providing a demo for every city is not necessary as they have been able to use existing demonstration manholes as references and when there is familiarity between cities, prospects know that they can trust a recommendation from neighboring municipalities.

A vast market

For the time being the firm is not looking to add any additional services beyond coatings and linings apart from perhaps manhole inspection, simply to support their efforts for project planning and for project documentation. “We looked at the potential of adding other services but since there is such a large demand and need for structural rehabilitation utilizing lining within our territories. If we can become the experts at that, that’s a recipe for a big win,” Huggins says.

He knows there are close to 5,000 manhole structures in different stages of aging and corrosion in the area he lives in — multiply that by all the states they work in and there is plenty of work to keep them busy.

Advanced Lining does have a few competitors in the area using different trenchless lining methods and products. Huggins feels that it is good for his customers to see that there are various options and encourages them to make comparisons. He says that the variety of solutions they bring to their customers are ideally suited to this geographic region because they are formulated to withstand the severe freeze-thaw cycles and ground movement the area goes through each year, which is hard on buried infrastructure.

Manhole rehabilitation is a staple for the firm but larger projects such as clarifiers, aeration basins and vertical structures within treatment plants are on the radar.

They are currently servicing their entire territory with one truck and that means a lot of miles and time spent on the road with the crew. Their plan is to have shops in different states as the business develops to be able to support cities on a long-term basis.

“One of the things we really love is to work with cities over a five- to 10-year period, helping them to develop manageable rehabilitation plans that they can budget for. This way we can give them volume discounts to create value-add and getting them what they need to protect their system,” Huggins says.

Dedicated team

In starting the new division, Huggins knew that they would need to put a strong emphasis on quality training and hiring dedicated employees. Linings and coatings can often be quite easy to apply in a substandard way or preparation may not be performed adequately. Huggins has sometimes found himself battling a perception that anyone can buy these materials and simply paint it on a pipe wall. To help eradicate this perception, Huggins has invested heavily in the training of his employees, focusing on developing their technical proficiency in the equipment they are using. This started with Tyler Garner, the firm’s first employee who now serves as operations manager, along with Austin Huggins, Seth’s son, now the second generation to work with the Advanced Pump and Equipment/Advanced Lining businesses. His “startup crew” has developed a model for future growth that ensures consistent application of the product on every project.

One way that they monitor quality is through a documented process system. Throughout each step of the rehabilitation process, from prep and application through final QC testing, the crew video-record and photograph to document everything. Because OBIC offers a 10-year warranty on both parts and labor, they stamp the date on every structure when it is completed and if there are any issues, they will remedy and repair it at no cost to the customer. To back themselves up, and ensure that warranty claims are a rare instance, having this documentation allows the crews to view all the process pictures and learn from them in the event of a warranty claim. On larger projects they also provide the customer a zip drive with all this photo and video documentation.

By investing the time to study and develop these quality control practices, they have fast-tracked their learning curve and project profitability. Being able to replicate is one of Advance Lining's core values. It is essential to Huggins and his crew that the quality of work will consistently prove to their market that this is a solid solution, it is a technology they can place their faith in and they as a service provider can be relied upon to effectively solve the region's aging infrastructure issues for the long-term.