

# The Philadelphia Inquirer

philly.com

C 18th Year, No. 321 • City & Suburbs Edition

Sunday, April 17, 2011 ★ Philadelphia Media Network ★ \$1.75

82 in some locations outside the metro area

## Their sign business has a big following

Bob and Sharon Green help us get from here to there and back again.

"Our signs are everywhere," says Bob, vice president of Garden State Highway Products Inc. in Vineland. "They're taken for granted," adds Sharon, the company's president.

This down-to-earth Cumberland County couple established Garden State Highway in 1987 with the help of a single employee, proceeds from the sale of their house, and a \$50,000 Urban Enterprise Zone loan.

The money was repaid long ago; the firm now fabricates everything from the stop signs on South Jersey and Philly corners to

the huge green signs above interstate highways from New York City to Washington, D.C., and west as far as Harrisburg.

Those oversize street signs above most major intersections in New Jersey? "We've probably done two-thirds of them," Bob says.

With nearly \$14 million in annual sales and more than 40 employees, Garden State has regional reach but a mom-and-pop personality. And the Greens, who learned their business from the ground up, have managed to keep up with the

technological revolution so profoundly changing the world of the printed word.

"Everything's going digital now," Bob observes.

He and Sharon walk me through a series of workrooms in their tidy, brightly lit shop, where digital and mechanical devices hum and clank as the aroma of ink fills the air. Employees are at keyboards and in motion around the silk-screening tables and machines called interstate squeeze rollers.

See **SIGNS** on B2



Kevin Riordan  
The Jersey Side

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## Garden State Highway Products

Featured In: The Philadelphia Inquirer  
April 17, 2011



KEVIN RIORDAN / Staff

"There's an art" to making highway and other road signs, says Joe McCracken (right), production manager, with owners Bob and Sharon Green outside Garden State Highway Products Inc. in Vineland, N.J.

Commentary By Kevin Riordan

## Their business always looking up

**SIGNS** from B1

The Greens explain as we go. It turns out there's more to signs than meets the eye.

The size, shape, typeface, and background colors of most regulatory signs (such as "Yield"), warning signs ("Stop ahead"), guide signs (H for hospital), and various route, construction, and street signs are standardized by the federal, state, county, or municipal government.

Silk-screening and other processes, including digital printing and die-cut lettering, apply words, numbers, or symbols to sheets of reflective material that is then affixed to aluminum panels.

Like the Route 55 exit signs that helped get me to Garden State Highway, the company's final products let us know where we are as concisely as a GPS unit.

"There's an art to it," production manager Joe McCracken says.

A story, too: The Greens both

grew up in Millville, where Bob got a forklift-driving job after graduation from Millville High in 1972. He left in 1977 for a job with a local highway-sign company, now defunct. "I wanted to learn something new," he says.

Sharon, meanwhile, had been "in college and working at Kmart, but when my scholarship" ended, she says, "I got a job in the silk-screening shop at the company."

Eventually, they married and moved with the company to Bergen County. But when the firm floundered, they moved back to Cumberland County and started Garden State.

"We called it that so it would seem bigger than it was," Sharon says, laughing. "The first few months were scary. We had a lien on our house ... but we knew people. Word of mouth really helped."

"It was that, and service. If somebody needed something and we had our jacket on and were

ready to leave for the day, we'd take our jacket off and go back into the shop and make the signs ourselves."

Like the technology, the competition has evolved. And there's "more of it, nationwide," Bob says, adding there are 17 other firms "at our level across the country."

The business should be good for a while: The Federal Highway Administration has set a series of deadlines through 2018 for replacement of virtually all highway signs that don't meet new visibility and light-reflection standards.

"It seems like we learn something new every day," Bob says.

"We're always busy," Sharon adds. "We're hoping our daughter and son want to step in and take it to the next level."

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