‘We don’t overcommit, and that’s not changing’

Kelly Deeks

Kāpiti’s SBA Civil has emerged as one of New Zealand’s fastest growing companies, taking the title of the country’s fastest growing construction business and placing sixth overall in the Deloitte Fast 50, while also winning a Civil Contractors New Zealand (CCNZ) Wellington Wairarapa Construction Award for its Paekākāriki Hill Road slip repair.

The company’s rise has been fuelled by founder Sam Aitkenhead’s Tier 1 background, which he has translated into SBA Civil’s defining point of difference: a small, agile contractor delivering projects to the same high standards as the largest players in the industry.

Aitkenhead, a qualified civil engineer, spent 15 years with Tier 1 contractors both in New Zealand and overseas, including managing Transmission Gully after returning from seven years abroad. “That experience gave me a really good platform and strong relationships across the industry,” he says. “I could see a gap for a smaller contractor that operated at Tier 1 standards. That’s been the driver behind everything we do, and it’s been key to the success of both this business and the projects we deliver.”

SBA Civil was founded in March 2020, just six days before New Zealand went into its first COVID-19 lockdown. With four children under five at home, Sam describes the decision as a leap of faith supported by his wife Laura, who returned to full-time work so he could pursue the new venture. The first year was spent consulting to keep revenue flowing, but by mid-2021 SBA Civil had invested in its first digger and truck. From there, the business grew rapidly, reinvesting every dollar back into a fleet that now numbers 30 to 40 machines, and expanding to a team of more than 20 staff.

“We’ve always managed growth through cash flow and never taken on lending,” Sam says. “We monitor our income weekly not monthly, so we’ve always got our finger on the pulse. Overheads are low, we don’t over-commit, and that’s not changing.”

That financial discipline has been crucial through recent tough market conditions. “When the market’s busy, three contractors will quote a job. When it’s quiet, ten will go after it, and some will price at zero profit just to keep going,” he says. “We’ll never do that. We know our costs and we stick to our benchmarks. The ones who don’t will feel it down the track.”

SBA Civil has built its reputation on taking on difficult projects others shy away from, including fuel lines and heavy utilities. The award-winning Paekākāriki Hill Road slip repair for Porirua City Council highlighted the company’s ability to innovate under pressure. Delivered ahead of schedule in just 13 days despite repeated rain events, the project kept one lane open throughout and introduced a new stabilisation product, Eco Reef, to the Wellington region.

Summerset.

The company has also diversified into commercial, industrial, and land development work to remain resilient, while keeping a strong focus on infrastructure. ISO, Tōtika, and SiteWise Gold accreditations underline SBA Civil’s commitment to quality, safety, and environmental performance.

But Sam says the biggest driver of success has been people. “When you’re a small crew, hiring legends makes all the difference,” he says. “The feedback we get from clients about the quality of our team is exactly what we want to be known for.”

Looking ahead, Sam has ambitious goals. “The past three years have given us massive confidence. We know what we’re doing, the service we offer is what the market needs, and now we’ve got the platform to take it to the next level. The vision from here is big – and very exciting.”