

Smartbox eyes void in local storage industry

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Charley MacKenzie likes stuff. Actually, he likes storing other people's stuff.

MacKenzie and his partner, Matt Bowry, opened Smartbox Portable Storage LLC, a new storage warehouse, this month in Elkridge. This is the growing, Richmond, Va.-based franchise's initial foray into the Baltimore market.

MacKenzie and Bowry got the idea to open a new Smartbox franchise after working for years as real estate agents in Howard and Anne Arundel counties. As the local real estate market grew, MacKenzie and Bowry noticed baby boomers downsizing and looking for a place to store unused furniture while families linked to military jobs moved frequently and needed help relocating.

"There is a lot of movement and growth in the area," MacKenzie said.

Smartbox has 10 franchise locations in the Southeast and mid-Atlantic regions, including Atlanta, Charlotte, N.C., and Fredericksburg, Va. The 3-year-old company plans to expand into Denver, Chicago, Houston, San Antonio and cities in Florida next year.

The new 20,000-square-foot Elkridge warehouse has four employees. MacKenzie said he hopes to grow to 60,000 square feet and add 16 workers within the next 18 to 24 months. He also said he expects to add warehouses in White Marsh, Owings Mills and on the Eastern Shore.

MacKenzie said he hopes his Smartbox franchise will break even in its first year.

Smartbox is one of a growing number of portable storage unit companies. Revenue for the self-storage industry totaled \$18.5 bil-



Matt Bowry (left) and Charley MacKenzie saw a need for more portable storage.

lion last year, according to the Self Storage Association. The Alexandria, Va.-based organization found that one in 11 households rent self-storage space that totals 2 billion square feet nationwide.

Locally, PODS Enterprise Inc. offers a similar service in the Baltimore region.

To open a Smartbox franchise, individuals should have a minimum net worth of \$1 million, said Dusty Rhodes, the company's director of business development.

Franchise owners pay \$40,000 to start a franchise in a city with a population of up to 200,000 people. For each additional 100,000 people, the franchise owner pays \$10,000. For example, a person who opens a franchise in a

city with 400,000 people would pay \$60,000.

The total investment for a new franchise is usually between \$750,000 to \$1 million, Rhodes said.

MacKenzie purchased franchising rights for the Baltimore area.

Smartbox plans to open another location in either Prince George's County or Montgomery County.

Smartbox's wooden storage units are covered in weatherproof vinyl and delivered directly to a customer's home or business. The storage units — measuring 8 feet long, 7 feet high and 5 feet wide — are rented per month for about \$69.