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WTCA Update

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A Look Back...the History of the Legislative Conference by Bob Becht, WTCA Membership Committee Chair

*One WTCA member's fond recollection of the inaugural Legislative Conference.
What perspective can you bring to the bargaining table in Washington, D.C.?*

Your membership in WTCA gives you the opportunity to participate in government. Our May meeting in Washington D.C. is the best way to take advantage of this benefit of WTCA membership. In 2000, I attended my first WTCA board meeting. That meeting took place in Herndon, VA, an hour outside Washington, D.C. Some lobbyists and others came out from D.C. to speak to us, but that gave us only a taste of the nation's Capitol. It was a straight-up board meeting except for a new event, the Component Manufacturer's Roundtable. Imagine a room full of truss manufacturers speaking their minds. I was hooked; it was one of those defining moments in your life that you never forget. I haven't missed a WTCA board meeting since. A year later we went to the belly of the beast, Capitol Hill in Washington, D.C. We spent a day visiting the offices of our legislators; the next day we analyzed our efforts and planned for the future.

We have returned to Washington, D.C. every year since. In 2001, our delegation met with Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott (see photo at left). Senator Lott owns lumber producing land and the Canadian Softwood Lumber issue is dear to his heart, as well as ours. Some of our delegates met with their senators and congresspeople; others met with congressional staffers. These meetings turned out to be better civics lessons than you got in high school. You can learn a lot just by visiting their offices. For instance, Florida Senator Bob Graham's office is informal whereas Florida Senator Bill Nelson's office is formal with ex-military staffers. Every year we are more effective and have more fun because of the previous year's visit. Last year, Carl Schoening said his delegation had not just visited their own representatives, but each representative from that state they could see. This year South Florida's delegation will do the same and visit every congressman that represents the South Florida chapter area.

What do you say when you visit a congressional office? That's where WTCA staff steps in. The Legislative Committee and the board create legislative goals and WTCA staff puts the tools in our hands to achieve those goals. Before the Hill visits, you are briefed by staff and given the WTCA Legislative Handbook, which has a few pages on each WTCA policy. You can pick the topics nearest to your heart to talk about. This year, WTCA provided us with even more ammunition: the estimated number of component plant jobs and total payroll by state to give to our congressmen. These are the kind of statistics elected officials respond to. Jobs and payroll (which mean taxes) are the things legislators are most concerned about.

Don't underestimate your power, especially when you are part of the WTCA congressional team. Congresspeople and their staff meet with a lot of lobbyists; consequently it's no surprise to them what lobbyists want. But legislators like to hear from ordinary citizens that are transacting business day in and day out, who have a story to tell.

Our spring trip to Washington, D.C. is not only an exercise in civic responsibility; it's a lot of fun. I bring my wife and we stay for a long weekend. Washington, D.C. is full of great museums and monuments, not to mention some excellent restaurants. I can tell you where to get great Malaysian food near DuPont Circle or upscale Soul Food in Union Station.

The legislative benefits of WTCA membership do not end when you return from D.C. WTCA works all year long on legislation and regulation vital to the component industry. SBC Magazine not only reports on legislative issues, it helps fund our legislative efforts. Kelli Gabel, our Legislative and Marketing Specialist, keeps us up to date with regular reports. And just like Santa getting ready for Christmas, Kelli and the rest of the staff are preparing for the next year's Capitol Hill visit all year long.

If you've been to a board meeting lately, you know I like to talk. Reading this, you know I like to talk about myself. But isn't it all about me and what I can get out of my WTCA membership and what I can contribute to the structural building component industry? It's also all about you; what you and your company can get out of your WTCA membership and what you can contribute to our industry. This year, I decided I wanted to visit all the legislators that represent the South Florida Chapter area. To set up the appointments, I emailed WTCA and it was done. If I wanted to visit my elected officials and didn't have WTCA to put it together, would it be possible to do and make an impact? Maybe it would be possible but it is not nearly as practical. More to the point, if I hadn't gone to D.C. with WTCA in 2000, I would not have known I wanted and needed to make a congressional visit, and how much of an impact it really does have in making our industry a little more successful.

P.S. The weather in D.C. is very nice in May. Last year my wife and I wandered in to a temporary exhibit the Department of Defense was having on the Mall. It was like a county fair with tanks. My wife is a nurse and she had a long conversation with a Special Forces medic. It was an unplanned D.C. experience and a very pleasant surprise.

Bob Becht is the president of Chambers Truss. Bob has been with Chambers Truss since 1981 and first worked in a truss plant in 1965. He serves WTCA as the South Florida Truss & Component Manufacturers Association (SFTCMA) board member. He developed the Florida accredited "Safe Truss Partnership" to improve truss installation safety.

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