



Adventures in Advocacy

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Backyard Advocacy

by Sean D. Shields

At this point, if you read the rest of the articles found in this spot, you've been exposed to a lot of big-picture, national aspects of U.S. governance. This was, for the most part, necessary because many of the issues affecting your business environment start at the federal level. The President, Congress, the Bureaucracy, the Courts: these are the "institutions" that govern taxes, trade, workplace safety, labor laws, litigation, immigration...well, you get the picture. However, the other essential aspect of governance in this country, found in your very "backyard," is state government.

Now, depending on where you're reading this, your state government may trace its roots farther back than the birth of this country (that's you, Virginia, Maryland and Massachusetts). For others, (stand up and be proud, Texas, California and New York), your state government has a legitimate claim that it runs an entire country on its own. With the prominence of state's rights throughout the founding documents of our nation, not to mention within its very name (United States), it is no wonder that state governments take their responsibilities of governance very seriously.

As you know, government on the state level mirrors the federal model quite closely in almost every case. States have three branches: a Governor (executive), a Legislature (two houses, except for Nebraska), and a Judiciary (court system), each with certain checks and balances over the other to distribute power. The advantage with this system, compared to the federal, is it is generally easier to understand, more accessible, and, most importantly, more receptive and responsive to your needs. States also have their own, locally-grown bureaucracy to contend with, but, except for the three huge states mentioned above they hopefully aren't as mired in red tape and regulation.

What this means is that you can likely be more effective at advocating on behalf of your business and your industry in the halls of your state capitol than anywhere else. This isn't an insignificant fact, given the issues that affect you on the state level can include various building and transportation permit requirements, building codes, fire codes, employee health insurance costs, commercial property taxes, and construction defect liability. Particularly in the realm of permits and codes, you know that an unfavorable regulation or ruling can cause a bigger headache than what the feds normally throw at you.

Fortunately, not only do you have the staff at WTCA headquarters to help you advocate your local lawmaker for favorable legislation and regulation, you also have a band of concerned and committed colleagues to help—your local WTCA Chapter. Your chapter probably has

some history in advocating changes in regulations and educating elected officials and the public about the structural building components industry. There is no better organization to turn to in a time of need.

In addition, WTCA has recently partnered with the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC), a non-profit trade association. With more than 2,400 members, ALEC is the nation's largest bipartisan, individual membership association of state legislators. ALEC is well known for its practice of drafting model legislation to address policy issues facing various states, which ALEC members then use to create their own bill to sponsor in their state legislature. This method of model legislation has proven very successful, and through its new partnership with ALEC, WTCA will endeavor to address transportation permit, building code and workforce issues currently challenging our industry. (See page 34 for more information.)

In state advocacy, it must be acknowledged that there is an inherent contradiction. On one hand, it is difficult to rally a group of local component manufacturers to a cause when it isn't burning hot and causing clear cash flow problems. On the other hand, the simplest way to be effective, and avoid such costly concerns, is through proactive advocacy. This means anticipating a potential problem long before it becomes law. It is always much, much easier to prevent a measure from passing than to try to overturn it once it's in statute.

I'll give you a recent example to prove it. The Iowa Truss Manufacturers Association (ITMA) recently invited some state lawmakers to attend a quarterly meeting. ITMA focused part of the discussion on a bill creating a State Fire Code Advisory Board and raised their concerns over the fact that the truss industry did not have a voice on the board. Fortunately, the bill was currently up for debate on the Senate floor, and one of the senators in attendance volunteered to offer an amendment that would add a truss industry representative to the board.

Ultimately, as a consequence of this discussion, the senator was successful with his amendment. When the bill finally passed out of the Iowa Senate, the truss industry had a seat on this very important board, hopefully avoiding potentially unfavorable fire code recommendations.

You're probably used to hearing this statement in a different context, but no problem is too big or too small to bring to your fellow manufacturers at your local chapter. In case you don't live in one of the 37 states currently represented by a WTCA Chapter, and you have a "backyard" issue that needs to be addressed, call WTCA—we'll be glad to help. **SBC**

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