

## Human Faces

### "Putting a Human Face on the Component Industry: Virginia County Rewards WTCA's Efforts" by Joe Kannapell

More quickly than we could cheer, "No sealed layouts in Virginia," a worse crisis erupted in Pennsylvania—the outright banning of trusses. Two lessons emerge: (1) Be prepared for challenges to our business, and (2) "Slow growth" initiatives are increasing the intensity of these challenges.

Members of the Wood Truss Council of the Capital Area (WTCCA) were blindsided last April, when builders and building officials in Virginia stated unequivocally at our first meeting, "Face it. You truss guys are going to have to step up to the plate and seal your layouts." Worse still, the President of the Home Builders' local chapter was leading the charge. We (under-appreciated) truss people were given a deadline of July 1 to respond. First, we had to answer the most basic question.

#### WHY DID PRINCE WILLIAM COUNTY INSPECTORS ASK FOR SEALED LAYOUTS?

A local inspector noted insufficient studding beneath a hip girder. Reviewing the truss manufacturer's layouts indicated that the trusses were correctly placed. However, he saw that the builder's plans placed the hip girder at the apex of the roof. When he notified the Building Official, Eric Mays, P.E., a policy requiring sealed layouts was quickly established and enforcement attempted.

As builders were "delegating" this requirement to their truss suppliers, a truss manufacturer tried to deflect this requirement by sending WTCA's Design Responsibilities document to Mr. Mays. This had the unfortunate result of uniting the builders against their truss suppliers. Sensing an impasse, the builders' association local chapter met privately with Mr. Mays and set the stage for the "ultimatum" that was delivered at our first formal meeting.

#### LESSON ONE

*Always act quickly, but in unison, via a consensus of the WTCA local chapter when confronting a serious policy issue.*

How WTCA helped: Through assistance from Michele Mc Cormick and Kirk Grundahl, several discussions highlighted key points:

- The County expressed a legitimate Public Safety need that wasn't going away. But, by sealing layouts, truss manufacturers would not improve the reliability of wall framing, and thereby not improve public safety.
- Neighboring counties had addressed that need by having the builder's architect sign a carefully worded cover sheet indicating review of truss layout.
- We had to get peripheral issues off the table. The County also wanted to have permanent bracing and truss tie-downs detailed on truss layouts. We agreed to solve this through education.
- The builders and their association are our customers and we needed to be on the same side.

## LESSON TWO

*WTCA must propose positive remedies.*

How the local Home Builders' Association (HBA) helped: The HBA local office agreed to a meeting and emailed their members. No one responded! Each truss manufacturer had to go out and nearly force its builder customers to this meeting—the builder's association wasn't going to do our work for us. Fortunately, two builder's architects were there, and they actually helped convince Mike Anderson, the President, that the builders were a required part of the solution. Mike had these architects develop a position, circulate it and present it to the County. Fortunately, members of our Capital Area Chapter (WTCCA) had worked with these architects before, so they were open to our suggestion of drafting a "sign-off" policy similar to neighboring counties.

## LESSON THREE

*Architects, builders and WTCA members need to be united in the code arena. Strong local WTCA chapters have the resources to mobilize the key players in the building community.*

Who the Building Department listens to first: The builders are the customers of the County Inspection Department, and their design professionals make the most appealing argument to P.E. Building Officials. We truss people are apt to be dismissed as "biased peddlers of products." So, we had one of the builder's architects present our united position on a highly professional level to Mr. Mays, the County Building Official. He listened and even gave a glimmer of hope, but he postponed a decision. We Chapter members agreed that a single person should work with Mr. Mays on any unresolved issues. By answering his questions we clarified bracing and connection issues before he released a draft just prior to our Fall Chapter Meeting.

## LESSON FOUR

*The Chapter must work diligently to ensure that its truss customers are involved in discussions with Building Officials. Follow-up is required to clarify issues.*

The final policy was released October 29, 1999, as follows: Building Designer of Record is responsible to perform a detailed review of the (truss) shop drawings, the permanent truss member bracing and truss layout plans to ensure compatibility with the structural design of the

building and County-approved plans. The Building Designer of Record is responsible for the design of the permanent building bracing and the truss to non-truss component connections.

## LESSON FIVE

*When all politics are local, national standing and economic interests don't impress local government officials. Let them hear from their most professional customers.*

Why challenges are intensifying: Across the nation, the movement to curb growth is accelerating —three-fourths of the 240 growth-curbing ballot initiatives passed in 1998. Twelve states passed growth-management legislation. In the DC Metro Area, building permits are expected to decline from 36,246 to 28,128 (22%) largely due to changing attitudes in fast-growth counties. In Prince William, for example, Sean Connaughton, a 38-year-old activist lawyer, unseated a 23-year Board of Supervisors' veteran using \$45,000 of his own money. He claimed she was responsible for two decades of sprawl. He plans to offer builders incentives to exchange approved residential lots for commercial property, or higher-end residential lots. In a parallel situation, votes by only two supervisors in a Pennsylvania Township resulted in exclusion of wood trusses.

## LESSON SIX

*Truss manufacturers need to be "plugged-in" to all local governmental regulatory hearings.*

Since the supply of developable land is finite, we need to join with our builder customers and be part of the solution, not part of the problem. Strong local WTCA Chapters will be the key!

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