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WTCA-National & Chapters Team Up for Success — Working Together to Make Tough Situations Better in New York by Libby Maurer

Thankful to have had the assistance of a national staff behind his chapter, Joe Plourde, New York Chapter (WTCANY) Secretary and General Manager of Operations for Universal Forest Products, Inc., summed up the past fifteen months stating, “It has been a very busy year in New York to say the least. Our staff has been very instrumental in assisting us with tackling these issues head on.” Those issues included building labeling, building code interpretations and fire controversies.

Plourde explained that staff at WTCA-National played a pivotal role in extracting emotional elements from the issues, allowing them to skip to the heart of the matter. “Bypassing the human emotion involved showed the rest of the state what we were here to do—fight on behalf of our industry.” Observing our mission to preserve and advance the industry's best interest, WTCANY and WTCA-National worked together to demonstrate their model for success in a spirit of cooperation that we can all build upon. The success of this teamwork need not be measured in wins or loses, but in the collective voice that resonated throughout the state—loud and clear.

NEW YORK STATE BUILDING PLACARD LAW

It's Hawthorne all over again. One hundred and fifty years after Nathaniel Hawthorne published *The Scarlet Letter*, New York component manufacturers came close to being branded with their very own version of the letter. This time around, it came in the form of a placard to be mounted on every commercial structure in the state, warning the fire service of the existence of trusses (wood or steel) in the building. Importantly, the state was only interested in labeling trusses and nothing else. Their message would be clear—buildings with trusses are inherently unsafe in the event of fire. Emotions in the legislature were running very high following the deaths of three firefighters, but no one had stopped to notice that truss construction had nothing to do with that tragedy. Unable to stop the law from passing, the chapter and national jumped in to make sure it was implemented in an equitable manner. Our industry policy is to support making a positive effort to promote universal building labeling of all types of construction and structural elements to help in early size-up identification, provided that the law as written does not discriminate against trusses and related engineered construction. Plourde stated, “It was decided that commercial and industrial buildings must be labeled with a ‘Scarlet Letter’ [placard] if they contained structural members that happened to be trussed. WTCA-National jumped right in with a large group formed to deal with this issue.”

That group included the American Forest and Paper Association (AF&PA), Carr Public Affairs, Inc., NYS Association of Fire Chiefs, Firemen's Association of the State of New York, NYS Governor's Office of Regulatory Reform, NYS Builders Association, AIA-New York State, NYS Building Officials Conference, The Vandervort Group, LLC, and the Northeast Retail Lumber Association.

“The goal of this effort was to get the attention of certain influential governmental bodies and discuss the issue without being clouded with the emotion that we component manufacturers had built up. WTCA-National and AF&PA were even able to draft the initial white paper uniting code language with our chapter's position. We, New York State component manufacturers, would never have been able to have the voice we have on this issue without our teamwork,” Plourde confirmed. Thus, since January 2002, the chapter and national have been engaged with the groups responsible for writing the administrative rules to implement this law. Involving seemingly endless meetings and calls, the chapter and national have remained tough in the thick of it all. At every stage in this process, the impacts on the truss industry are being taken into account.

CITY OF POMPEY FIRE

In March 2002, two firefighters were killed in a suburb of Syracuse, NY. Records were subpoenaed, and criminal charges were debated by a grand jury. In this situation, a fire started due to sparks from a grinder that ignited dust in the ceiling. After the fire spread to the trusses, it burned for 45 minutes before any substantial amount of water was sprayed on it, other than from a garden hose by the owner of the building. Unfortunately, there was a fatal error made by the fire ground command to send firefighters onto that floor. Emotions could not have been higher, and the event could have devastated the truss industry in the state as stories blaming trusses for the firefighter deaths spun out of control.

Instead, the chapter and national immediately entered the fray to separate fact from myth. As Plourde explained, “National was able to talk to the press and reporters and take the emotion out of the issue. In talking to the press, they never missed a beat. Also, they have extensive resources for networking, making legislative contacts and gathering information. I think it was much easier for national to handle that part because they had no emotional stake in the process.” In these situations it is always imperative that the local chapter contact national and work together to educate the public.

FIRE TEST BURN IN COLONIE

In October, Lou Daviau of Simpson Strong-Tie alerted WTCANY and WTCA-National to an impending fire test burn to contrast stick framing and trusses by the Capitol District Chapter of the New York State Building Officials Conference. With very little advance notice, a contingent of chapter members arrived on the scene to make their own videotape of the burn. Since the rhetoric that day was very much prejudiced against truss construction, it was critical that chapter members were there to see the test and be prepared to offer another perspective. Maintaining a constant dialogue between chapter members and staff, the process of education began immediately. Given that we had been there too, we could respond on the facts and merits of the “test” and prevent misinformation, misunderstanding and perception from being blown out of proportion. Moreover, it has redoubled chapter members' commitment to education their local building officials.

IBC SNOW LOAD INTERPRETATION

As many states are experiencing, the building code changes have created situations where the interpretation of the codes is less than clear. Ranging in impact from a nuisance to a serious additional cost, coming up with uniform solutions to varying interpretations can be tricky too. In New York, the issue according to Plourde became snow loads. "The state adopted the new IBC language, where a provision on snow loads caused state manufacturers to interpret the code in different ways such that it could work to the benefit of their business depending on which interpretation was made. National came to the rescue to 'level the playing field' so we would all interpret the code similarly." At the most recent chapter meeting and with the assistance of staff, a uniform interpretation was discussed and agreed to by all.

KNOWING THERE IS SOMPLACE TO TURN

As far as WTCANY is concerned, the lesson is clear. By working together, the chapter and national can take on any issue and strive for the best possible outcome for the industry. Plourde describes it best this way, "Someone from national staff always made the effort to be present at our meetings when we absolutely needed them to be, recognizing our collective cause and best interests. They are better at putting numbers together and assembling facts than we are. When we, as New York state component manufacturers, have our businesses and livelihoods to win or lose, there is certainly going to be an emotional factor in our reaction to issues. That's why we rely on national to extract the emotion and objectively lay every issue out on the table."

Furthermore, the long year for the chapter is not over yet, but neither is WTCA-National's help. As Plourde acknowledged, "A few of these issues, if they had been ignored, could have gotten us into a sling. The bottom line: we weren't left out to dry. National stepped up to the plate every time for us." Whether it is one crisis, or three, or more, we're all in this together.

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