

STRUCTURAL BUILDING COMPONENTS MAGAZINE

June/July 2004

2004 WTCA Legislative Conference Recap: Banding Together for a Booming Voice by SBC Staff

With great weather and an outstanding location, attendees of the WTCA Fourth Annual Legislative Conference in Washington, D.C. came out in strong support for the industry. The following contain members' thoughts about the conference.

Many thanks to the sponsors who made this conference possible; Gold: Alpine Engineered Products, MiTek, Robbins Engineering, Truswal Systems, USP Structural Connectors, and Weyerhaeuser/Trus Joist; Bronze: Simpson Strong-Tie.

WEDNESDAY, MAY 6:

The Wednesday night dinner was the group's featured event held at the Palm Restaurant, a swanky hotspot known for hosting many political powerhouses. On this specific night, we shared a glimpse of Kennedy clan diva Maria Shriver (a.k.a. Mrs. Schwarzenegger). Congressman Todd Akin (MO-2) delivered the keynote address to conference attendees.

With the help of Tom Manenti of MiTek, Congressman Akin took time out of his busy schedule to address over 70 eager listeners on the current Congress and this administration's accomplishments to date. He also provided us with insights on how best to interact with members of Congress, commenting that our organization is doing the right thing by holding an annual conference. He noted that being persistent and consistent in visiting the offices is very important because relationships are developed over time.

Akin was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives in 2000. Prior to this, he gained 12 years of experience with the Missouri House of Representatives. After earning a degree in management engineering from Worcester Polytechnic Institute, he was an officer in the army, and spent time with IBM and Laclede Steel.

"I would recommend this trip to every truss manufacturer; it gives you an opportunity to help shape your government. I have attended for two years and the WTCA staff does a great job arranging the meetings and providing us with information; making the Hill visits much easier." - John Hogan, Vivco Components

"The Hill visits were simple and laid out well with someone always there to help out." - Jim Swain, Carpenter Contractors of America

"It's very advantageous for our industry to use our collective position to gain an audience with our legislators. Our group alone probably isn't enough to sway our representatives, but when we piggyback with other trade groups who share similar interests on issues such as steel, our united voices are certainly heard." - David Horne, Universal Forest Products, Inc.

"The three days I spent in D. C. gave me the opportunity to see how government

Akin currently serves on the Armed Services, Science and Small Business Committees.

works from the inside.” - Jason Hogan, Vivco Components

THURSDAY, MAY 7:

To give attendees valuable insight on issues currently affecting small businesses and component manufacturers, WTCA staff prepared a PowerPoint® presentation of the Legislative Positions and Policies handbook and gave a straightforward overview of key points to make while visiting legislators on the Hill.

A discussion about raw material cost increases—both lumber and steel—dominated the morning session. Both lumber and steel have been saddled by governmental marketplace intervention that has caused costs to be highly volatile.

Specifically, the softwood lumber dispute has been an issue since the first conference in 2000 and for that matter, since the early 1900s. WTCA’s position is and will continue to be for free trade. WTCA members urged their elected officials to encourage all parties to get back to the negotiating table to resolve this issue. Without a resolution, the unintended economic consequences of tariffs and their impact on U.S. jobs in the value-added wood products industry will continue. WTCA is working with various elected officials on initiating and circulating a “Dear Colleague” letter to Secretary Evans with the Department of Commerce and Ambassador Zoellick, the United States Trade Representative, to encourage them to get back to the negotiating table and resolve the dispute. Based on the facts, a permanent solution is the best approach for all U.S. workers and their families.

The most recent issue touching the building components marketplace is the steel tariffs imposed in May 2003, which created another marketplace intervention that caused uncertainty with steel supply and costs. Relief was expected when the steel tariffs were lifted in the fall of 2003. Rather than relief, there has been supply shortages and upward price pressure with no options. While the dynamics of this issue are complicated, the shortage may not have been as bad had the government not imposed the steel tariff, which disrupted foreign steel supply.

The attendees’ aim was to voice the industry’s concern over the impact and unintended consequences that government intervention has had on small business and the employees within the industry.

Other industry issues that were taken to the hill were passage of S. 1637 or the FSC/ETI JOBS bill, which would give a tax rebate to all U.S. manufacturers. Another senate bill is S. 545 or Association Health Plans. This important legislation would allow WTCA, as well as other associations, to provide members the opportunity to band together to purchase health insurance with the same clout that larger corporations are entitled to.

The undisputed highlight of this year's constituent meetings was an unprecedented number of attendee meetings with their actual Senator or Representative: 21. This represents a significant increase from conferences of the past, when attendees met with legislative staffers.

Each participant was able to provide their legislator or staffer with bountiful information about the building components industry. Each meeting folder included the "Legislative Positions and Policies" handbook, the May issue of SBC Magazine, additional handouts of letters and talking points for "hot" issues, and individual state maps. (This information can be seen by WTCA members on at www.woodtruss.com.) New handouts this year listed important member statistics by state, which proved to be instrumental in giving legislators a snapshot of the industry. The handouts included a map of each state, showing the estimated number of total employees, payroll and total component sales. The sheets also listed each WTCA member location and representative. It allowed elected officials to really grasp the size of the industry that they are representing.

Thanks again to all of the sponsors and the many participants who helped make this conference a great success. We look forward to the 2005 conference!

FRIDAY, MAY 8:

At the Board of Directors meeting, members enjoyed recounting their experiences on the hill. A few highlights:

- Tom Reaves of North Dakota commented, after meeting with Senator Johnson for 15 minutes, "It's a start of a relationship!"
- Clyde Bartlett noted that he enjoyed the opportunity to explain what was going on with his own business, but also giving details on why settling the lumber agreement is essential—on behalf of WTCA as well as small business in general.
- Many legislators expressed interest in accepting members' invitations to come and take plant tours.
- The current stalemate in the Senate is really frustrating some legislators and they noted that it's tougher to get things done in an election year.
- Scott Arquilla met with all new staffers this year, and noted the inevitable re-education process. This is part of the reason it's so essential to keep coming back every year to get our message to our elected officials.
- Many legislators agreed to sign on to a "Dear Colleague Letter" if we could get a legislator to initiate it, which we are working on aggressively.
- Several members praised the usefulness of our prepared package and statistics.
- It was noted that an effective way to start a meeting with the member of Congress in your district is to focus on a local issue first, because it's something they can potentially take action on.
- Board members noted that the preparatory teleconference a couple weeks ahead of the conference was very helpful.
- This year, we created voting records pulled from the National Association of Manufacturers and the Associated Builders and Contractors, which was useful to members to see how their legislators voted on the key issues affecting manufacturing and construction.

- With several members of TPI actively participating in the conference this year, there was great synergy between our two industries and the impact of the lumber and steel issues are much more visible because of it.
- Allen Erickson, WTCA's Legislative Committee Chair, commented that repeat visits are amazingly important.

FIRST-TIMER REFLECTIONS

In April SBC Staff interviewed Bruce Bain of Richco Structures about his expectations for the Legislative Conference as a first-time attendee. Here are a few comments from Bruce after his return home from the conference.

Did the conference meet your overall expectations?

"The Legislative Conference was great experience for me. It directly related to the work I do on a daily basis. Since I have little experience in politics, the Hill visits with legislators and their staffers gave me some insight into the political process."

What issues or concerns that affect your business and the industry were you able to discuss with your legislator(s)?

"We were able to discuss trade issues with Canada with regard to the Softwood Lumber Agreement and trade issues with China regarding steel prices. Health care was another topic we discussed and how it affects our operating costs."

Why was it important for you to discuss these concerns with your representative(s)?

"If we don't take the time to keep our elected officials informed on our concerns, they won't know what to act on from a legislative viewpoint."

What events—beside the Hill visits—did you enjoy most about the conference?

"I enjoyed the dinner with Senator Akin (R-MO). It was interesting to hear his view on what is going on in Washington and how his party was working for businesses like the component manufacturers."

Will you consider attending the conference next year?

"I plan on attending the conference next year to continue my relationship and an open dialogue with the legislative offices."

Why is it important for other component manufacturers consider attending the conference in the future?

"We have much to gain by having one voice as members of the Wood Truss Council of America. We can promote our cause and influence the political process with the votes from people we know within the industry."

LESSONS LEARNED

- This was the Fourth Annual Legislative Conference and our members had 21 meetings directly with their Senator or Representative. The moral of this story is that it is important to keep

coming to Washington each year. Relationships are established and our representatives truly do want to hear directly from their constituents.

- Focusing our message on how issues affect jobs and payroll has a big impact on legislators.
- In speaking with Congressman Akin, he made it clear that the most credible message always comes from a businessperson in their district or in the case of a Senator, in the state. They are very interested in knowing the impact of legislation on your business and employees.
- Congressman Akin also mentioned how valuable getting involved in a campaign can be to your business. While it takes some time, the relationships developed in this environment will be lasting and your voice is sure to be heard.
- There is a strong interest in visiting businesses at home. Individual company visits or organized chapter events (like plant tours), are great ways for the legislator to learn and at the same time campaign for votes and support.

[SBC HOME PAGE](#)

Copyright © 2004 by Truss Publications, Inc. All rights reserved. For permission to reprint materials from SBC Magazine, call 608/310-6706 or email editor@sbcmag.info.

The mission of Structural Building Components Magazine (SBC) is to increase the knowledge of and to promote the common interests of those engaged in manufacturing and distributing of structural building components to ensure growth and continuity, and to be the information conduit by staying abreast of leading-edge issues. SBC will take a leadership role on behalf of the component industry in disseminating technical and marketplace information, and will maintain advisory committees consisting of the most knowledgeable professionals in the industry. The opinions expressed in SBC are those of the authors and those quoted solely, and are not necessarily the opinions of any of the affiliated associations (SBCC, WTCA, SCDA & STCA).