



Legislative Conference 2007: *Storming the Hill*

By Carl Schoening

The 2007 Legislative Conference has ended with a lot of positive, meaningful visits with elected leaders. This is the first time I have put pen to paper to report on the legislative conference, which is odd because this is one of the most important WTCA gatherings of the year and one of my favorites.

I called it "Storming the Hill" for several reasons. First, the group that attended this year turned out to be an interesting mix of experienced and first time attendees. But every individual was prepared to go to battle on behalf of the component industry. This was my seventh legislative conference and I am still excited when I arrive. We begin by getting briefed on the issues each year. The materials the WTCA staff prepares are the best. I have seen material prepared by other groups, most of which boast larger membership and higher legislative budgets, and none of them compare. When we walk into a Congressman's or Senator's office we all know that we will leave there having presented a positive professional impression of our industry and know that we have done our very best to impress the importance of our issues.

The second reason for the title is that this year everyone was ready to "charge" the hill and win the battle. This was just one battle in the war for success. Those of us that have been to DC before know that this is a marathon and not a sprint. It may take several visits before we fully achieve our agenda. But we know that this year we won the day. The response from legislators was positive and more consistent this year than any other year I have attended.

An Exciting First

This year the Texas contingent consisted of Jack Dermer, Frank Klinger and me. Each of us has attended before and we have a well laid plan when we visit elected officials. We go together. This year was a first for us (and the Conference!); we visited with all five Representatives from our state.

"It is a tremendous opportunity to see how the government works and our opportunity to voice our opinions and be listened to. It's an opportunity to get up close and get a personal feeling for your legislator's opinion on issues."

—Jack Dermer,
American Truss Systems, Inc.

Meaning, we go to each others elected Representatives as well as the Senators from our state. This allows us to show a strong united front for our state and not just from a specific congressional district. We all know the part each of us will play in the visit. We know who does what and when. We don't speak over each other and we move through the information quickly. It is important to be concise and thorough. Elected officials and their staff are very busy and we get a limited amount of time to make an impact that will get them to review the materials we leave and to pass that critical information on to the elected official. Preparation is the name of the game.

Frank agrees that our strategy is effective. "Usually a group of three or four is perfect," he said. "One guy can talk, one can take pictures, and the others can fill in or take turns. It's teamwork." He also reminded us that in years past, the highest number of elected officials we visited was two.

Apart from gaining credibility by going in a group, Jack thinks consistent attendance at the conference helped us this time. "The repeated visits may have helped in getting to meet with all of the Congressmen," he said. "They were familiar with who we were and what we were doing. Some Congressmen even remembered us from before. When they feel more comfortable with you, and know you, they are more willing to welcome you in."

As for feeling nervous or uncomfortable, just remember that these people work for you and others from your state or district. You, in many ways, are their boss. Without you and other concerned citizens like you, they could not get elected. You must still show them respect for the job they are doing, but there is no need to be nervous about the visit.

Frank said we were lucky to have met with the Congresspeople themselves. "When I talk to aides, I'm never sure what info will get back to the congressman," he commented. "But in this case we were able to speak with them, and most were very knowledgeable on the subjects we were discussing. It was nice to be able to talk to them directly and very interesting to hear what they had to say." Jack was excited to hear that one of his Congressmen was very familiar with what his company produces. "It really surprised me. When I left, I had a different perception of him."

This year our primary topic was immigration. There has been a lot of discussion about how to improve or reform the current immigration system the last few years. This is an emotional issue with very strong feelings on both sides. In some camps the idea of gathering up all illegal immigrants and sending them back to their country of origin was the main goal a year ago. Fortunately, time has softened the perspective of both sides and it appears a compromise bill is in the making. What is needed is a well thought out guest worker program that will establish guidelines for illegal immigrants to register their status in the United States and receive verification of their right to work. This will mean coming up with a way to provide tamper proof credentials that will allow employers to positively know the status of each individual applying for a job and hold the employer harmless if they follow the rules to the letter of the law. All of the lawmakers we spoke to this year were pushing hard to the use of biometric technology and most were confident that a law would be passed before the next presidential election. That was great to hear.

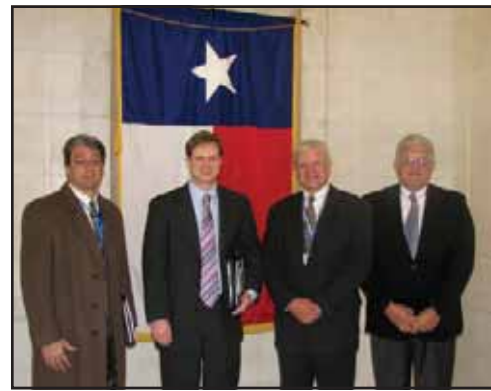
Another area that was on our agenda was the Workforce Investment Act. This would provide funding to assist employers in training costs. This is an important measure when you consider how much component manufacturers spend training every member of the staff from production to design to managers. This could really help component manufacturers take our industry to a new level.

We also discussed the need for health care reform. Escalating health care costs have forced many employers to reduce coverage or employer participation in premiums and have even force some employers to drop health benefits completely. We discussed the need for broadening HSA (Health Saving Accounts) benefits and providing a greater range of benefits. All of the lawmakers were very much in favor of these concepts.

I know that some of you are thinking, "I don't know anything about those areas!" Don't worry. You don't have to be an expert. What we need are people that are passionate about the component industry to attend and pass that enthusiasm on to the elected official. One way to begin building a relationship with your elected leader is to call their office and invite them to tour your facility when they are in the area. They want to visit constituents, especially businesses in their area. When they visit they will see that we are a sophisticated industry and that they will come into contact with a number of voters in one place. You will be pleasantly surprised at the response you will get. Chances are you will also get a bit of free publicity if you tip off the local paper that someone from Washington, DC will be touring your facility. This helps you and it helps the elected official.

Jack says tours are important because "[legislators] get a chance to see exactly what we build and manufacture, and what we supply to our customers." Frank has noticed that they tend to remember you better the next time you meet in DC because they recognize your name and plant.

Lastly, while a lot of good work gets done at the Legislative Conference there is a lot of fun that goes on as well. The time spent with other industry leaders is valuable. It is your chance to pick the brain of other component manufacturers in the after hours lounges. Chances are you may even get to play a game of pool with someone you know and have bragging rights for a year. Please join us next year as we plant the WTCA flag on Capitol Hill. **SBC**



Members from WTCA's Texas Chapter (Jack Dermer, Frank Klinger, Carl Schoening and Jim Giunta) visited all five Representatives and both Senators from their state. Top to bottom: Aide for Senator John Cornyn (R); Aide for Senator Kay Bailey Hutchison (R); Representative Kenny Marchant (R); Representative Gene Green (D); Representative Rubén Hinojosa (D)

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