

It's not Where You Start, It's Where You Finish

Peter E. Warshaw

Newspaper headlines frequently produce unhappy feelings, which are made even more unhappy when the headlines are a strong reminder of an exciting and promising start to a major event that could have benefitted an entire state. Such was the case when our industry was one of the more important participants in a program that would greatly affect the future of our families.

Referring to the title of this column, let's recall where we started: a chain of events within the ASPE New Jersey Chapter that caused our involvement in a most worthwhile project.

In the late 1990s the New Jersey Chapter was chosen by Greg Gladfelter, chairman of the Resource Enhancement Committee (REC), to act as a test lab for a program that would call for greater affiliate involvement in chapter, as well as national, activities. The goal was to market ASPE as an educational resource to the engineering and contracting communities, including fostering professional development and a better understanding of the business side of our industry.

The original efforts were basic: seeking more efficiency in chapter program formats, sponsorship of young engineers and students at the meetings, and recruitment of speakers. The next step was an assignment to assume complete responsibility for chapter meetings—setting dates, recruiting speakers, promoting meetings, and, most importantly, choosing topics that, while business oriented, would directly affect the daily business of consulting engineers and mechanical contractors.

The timing could not have been better. At that time the state of New Jersey had just received an \$8.2 billion federal grant for a school construction program, with a new set of guidelines for its implementation including an overview of the program, a new system of design management, plan review schedules, the definition of the role of the consultant, and potential product standardization.

In the very early stages it was critical to identify not only the players but the "players' players"—who and where was the authority? This was the assignment that was accepted by the affiliates and the chapter REC. REC member John Traynor was a longtime participant in our industry trade associations as well as the state's business development groups. He was familiar with the makeup of the involved state agencies as well as how they interfaced with the state's construction industry. He started from scratch, developing a series of contacts leading to other contacts that ultimately led to *the* authority: the New Jersey Economic Development Authority, which had complete responsibility for the implementation and financing of the total program.

Then came a more difficult task: identifying and then recruiting the individual in that agency who would accept an invitation to one of our chapter meetings and present an overview of how the program would affect our industry. Mr. Traynor didn't want just any speaker; he wanted *the* speaker. He worked through the proper channels and personally offered the invitation to Caren Franzini, executive director of the New Jersey Economic Development Authority. To the best of our knowledge, this was her first public appearance regarding the school construction program.

Appearing before the chapter's largest meeting attendance in history, she went over the details of the program in a forthright and easy-to-understand manner. Emphasizing her thoroughness

and thoughtfulness, she distributed a complete summary of the program in a handout that included point-by-point explanations of individual segments. Pleased with the opportunity to interface with those who would be directly involved in the school construction program, Ms. Franklin identified ASPE as a future resource for the New Jersey Economic Development Authority, a major recognition for the chapter and the Society.

In subsequent years we continued our presentations of outstanding speakers such as Arthur Guida, director of external affairs for the Public Service Electric and Gas Company (PSE&G). He appeared right after a major New York blackout and detailed the procedures PSE&G had in place to guard against blackouts in their system. He also detailed all the ways PSE&G and consulting engineers could work together better, especially in the early phases of design. He too identified ASPE as a future resource. A speaker for the New Jersey Alliance of Business Development also addressed us on the role ASPE could play in participation with that organization. We were truly learning the business side of our business.

So what kind of unhappy feelings made reference to in the opening paragraph were generated by a particular newspaper headline? Sadly enough, the school construction program that held so much promise and individually gave REC its impetus toward state business involvement was what came up short. Like any government program it spawned its own system of bureaucracy. In this case it was the New Jersey Schools Construction Corp., established three years ago to bring new schools to the poorest districts. Investigations exposed millions of dollars wasted on excessive bonuses, exorbitant fees, and design errors. In the effort to build schools quickly, state officials streamlined the process, so property acquisition, design, surveying, and other tasks all were moving ahead at the same time funds were disappearing.

A report by the state's inspector general cited the Schools Construction Corp. for a wide range of internal weaknesses that led to such problems as buying land already owned by local governments, paying some workers three times what comparable state employees made, and failing to give any senior official responsibility for overseeing project costs. Predictably the chief executive officer of the program resigned. His only comment was, "Money was wasted."

A program that gave our ASPE chapter a firm start in establishing our business education capabilities is special to us. Perhaps the new direction of school construction will present an opportunity for ASPE to be of service.

In the words of my sainted Uncle Herschel, "It's not where you start; it's where you finish." ♦



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