ACEC OREGON AT-A-GLANCE

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in Oregon,” Fox says. “That is a huge part of what ACEC does: advocate for our industry’s interests. People also appreciate the networking aspect. I have developed great relationships with my competitors, quite honestly. On one project, we are competing head-to-head, and on the next, we are teaming up, with one firm as the prime and one as the sub. There is a lot of camaraderie.”

ADVOCATING FOR INDUSTRY

A constant focus of ACEC Oregon’s work in recent decades has been the state’s QBS law, which requires public agencies to evaluate and select firms on the basis of their qualifications, rather than their fees. The state Member Organization (previously known as the Consulting Engineers Council of Oregon) advocated since at least the late 1980s for the first version of the law, which Gov. John A. Kitzhaber signed in 1997. In 2011, ACEC Oregon successfully lobbied for a stronger version of the law. But in 2019, legislators appeared poised to strip the law of much of its effectiveness, and the state Member Organization negotiated a replacement that preserves many of the previous law’s protections.

“A bunch of cities and counties fought back about there not being a price element in the law, and they got a few legislators to write a bill that would have basically decimated QBS and brought us back to the days of pure price selection,” Peterson says. “They would have still used some qualifications, but it would have basically taken the QBS law and thrown it in the trash. Our choices were to walk away and let the legislature kill the QBS law completely, or find a way to work with them.”

“We chose a path to engage and work together with folks whom we had previously had an adversarial relationship with,” he says. “We helped build a coalition of folks from the professional design community and folks from the cities and counties and spent the better part of a year meeting, discussing, and ultimately writing legislation which worked out a compromise which provided elements of price information combined with a high level of qualifications-based selection (QBS) and organizational requirements for solicitations where a price element was desired. Passing that legislation was a success for both sides of the issue.”

BY CALVIN HENNICK

"We are unique in Oregon," Alison Davis, executive director of ACEC Oregon, says with a laugh. "I will say that." ACEC Oregon’s relaxed culture reflects the “casual atmosphere” of the state, according to Davis. It is a state more known for counterculture than for booming business, a state where the largest city’s unofficial slogan is “Keep Portland Weird.” And yet, ACEC Oregon has a lengthy track record of successfully advocating for its members’ business interests.

Founded in 1956, ACEC Oregon helped to define consulting engineering in the state. Today, ACEC Oregon is developing engineering leaders of the future and helping Member Firms adapt to rapidly changing conditions in the time of COVID-19. In between, the Member Organization has helped to secure state funding for enormous projects, provided education for Member Firms’ employees, and fought for legislation and regulations that have helped create a more favorable business climate for engineers.

“Early on, I recognized how well organized and effective ACEC was,” says Erik Peterson, ACEC Oregon national director and president of Peterson Structural Engineers. He has been involved in the state Member Organization for more than two decades. “It is the quality of the programming, the quality of their advocacy, and just the quality of the people. Every time I turn around, I get more impressed with what they are able to do.”

Larry Fox, president of ACEC Oregon and COO of DOWL, has been involved with the Member Organization since the mid-1990s. Fox says he was initially drawn in by the prospect of valuable professional development. But over time, he has come to place a higher value on the advocacy and networking opportunities provided by ACEC Oregon.

“As I have matured and been involved in the organization, I very much recognized the benefit to our industry on a political front, both on a national level and then locally here Steeped in history, ACEC Oregon has a rich tradition of achieving profound advances on behalf of the state’s engineering industry.

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That sort of advocacy—playing defense to maintain industry protections that were put in place years ago—is something that is invisible to many people, even though it has a dramatic impact on engineering firms throughout the state.

“To me, one of the things we struggle with sometimes is being able to articulate the value of being a member of ACEC,” Fox says. “It is sometimes hard for people to see the value proposition. But once they get involved, they start to see it.”

PARTNERING WITH THE PUBLIC SECTOR

ACEC Oregon has also lobbied for billions of dollars in funding for transportation projects over the past two decades. In 2017, it helped push for $5.3 billion in transportation funding, much of which is going toward projects involving Member Firms. The organization has worked closely with the Oregon Department of Transportation (ODOT) to coordinate on such bills and to ensure the state has the capacity to complete the work.

“We have a very strong relationship with ODOT,” says Fox. “They were fairly standoffish when I was first involved in the industry, but ACEC has created a great forum, where we have a liaison committee with the leadership of ODOT. The relationship has morphed into high-level people at ODOT coming to the table and working with industry to solve problems.”

For the 2017 transportation package, ACEC Oregon collaborated with ODOT on a white paper on how the state would be able to deliver the program if funding were approved. The organization has also advocated for ODOT leaders and employees to receive fair compensation and has even pushed for more hiring at the state agency to facilitate the completion of large projects.

“That may sound like an odd thing for consultants to do, but we recognized they needed more staff to manage this program,” Fox says. According to David Kim, statewide project delivery manager for ODOT, the three words that come to mind when he thinks of ACEC Oregon are “partnership, innovation, and capacity.”

He notes that the $5.3 billion transportation package requires the state to outsource around 70 percent of the engineering work to consultants, including ACEC Member Firms. “The partnership is so strong,” Kim says. “We have bimonthly meetings, where we have over 100 attendees, with a good mix of consultants and ODOT staff. And then there are smaller working groups that focus on issues and hurdles that industry and ODOT have encountered. The dynamic is great.”

While relationships between private consultants and public agencies can sometimes become adversarial, Kim notes that ACEC Oregon Member Firms and ODOT are ultimately working toward the same objectives.

“At the end of the day, we all have the same goal in mind, and that’s serving the public with good infrastructure projects,” he says. “As long as the state and industry both focus on that, it will create more opportunities for investment. If we can demonstrate a positive track record through partnership and delivery, only good things will come out of that.”

WORKING ON LANDMARK PROJECTS

ACEC Oregon members have a long track record of working on some of the most prominent projects in the state, some of which are recognized through the Member Organization’s Engineering Excellence Awards. The competition recognizes engineering firms for projects that demonstrate an “exceptional degree of innovation, complexity, achievement, and value,” and the event creates a “red carpet” experience that celebrates the otherwise largely unheralded work that goes into complex engineering projects.

The 2020 Project of the Year Choice Award went to KPFF Portland for its work on an expansion to Providence Park—the stadium that is home to both the Portland Timbers Major League Soccer team and the Portland Thorns National Women’s Soccer League team. The project added 4,000 seats in three tiers above existing seating, renovated public infrastructure, and improved site sustainability. The result is visually striking, with floating rakers and a 120-foot cantilevered superstructure.

Jinie Linsenmeyer, marketing manager for KPFF Portland, notes that the simplest way to complete the expansion would have been to place giant posts inside the stadium—but that solution would have obstructed views for hundreds of spectators at every game. The more aesthetic solution was also vastly more complex, and Linsenmeyer notes it is gratifying for the firm to be recognized for its work.

“Engineers solve problems, and a lot of their work goes unnoticed by the public if they are doing their job right,” Linsenmeyer says. “So to be recognized for this—on a project where the engineering is such a contribution to a dazzling landscape that is going to stand for years and years—it really important.”

Last year, top honors at the state’s Engineering Excellence Awards (EEA) went to Vancouver Waterfront Park, a project submitted by four firms. The park, which opened in September 2018, is part of the Vancouver Waterfront master plan, created to connect Vancouver, Wash., to the Columbia River. The project features plazas, an extended Vancouver Renaissance Trail, viewpoints, a water feature, a playground, an urban beach, and the Grant Street Pier—a concrete, cable-stayed structure projecting almost 100 feet over the Columbia River. It also received an Honor Award in the national 2019 EEA competition.

The 2018 Project of the Year award went to Anderson Perry & Associates, Inc., for its work on Crooked River Wetlands for the city of Prineville. The project, which uses natural processes to treat wastewater, saved an estimated $54 million compared to the cost of constructing a mechanical treatment plant.

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LOOKING AHEAD

Although steeped in history, ACEC Oregon remains nimble, ready to respond to the changing needs of the organization’s members. Currently, Davis is looking to find the best ways to support Member Firms as they navigate COVID-19. The organization has continued to hold online networking events, even as in-person meetups have been put on hold.

“That is a reason to belong to ACEC Oregon—the networking opportunities, working with other Member Firms, getting to know each other,” Davis says. “That is one of the benefits of membership, really, and we are figuring out ways to do all this online.”

In addition to seeking an alternative to its annual Fall Conference, ACEC Oregon is figuring out how to support its Leadership Development Series, a program introduced several years ago to support the development of new leaders in the industry.

Lindsi Hammond, an associate at GRI, participated in the series and notes that the sessions gave her exposure to aspects of the industry that at the time were outside the scope of her day-to-day work—including legislative advocacy, marketing, and even topics such as emotional intelligence.

“Through that program, I have built relationships with other engineers,” says Hammond. “It is a safe space to explore all these new topics, and it helped me become a better leader, manager, and consulting engineer.”

The program, according to Hammond, pushed her to move beyond the “number crunching” that she loves and helped her to discover a new side of her professional self.

“I find such fulfillment in figuring out how I can help young engineers find their passion and build their skill sets,” she says. “Without doing a program like this, it would be hard to know that I have the tools to do that. It helped grow that passion that I did not even know was there.”

Calvin Hennick is a business, technology, and travel writer based in Milton, Mass.