
The Road They Traveled

*Perspectives from our Past Presidents
on our 75th Anniversary*

By Richard Ecke, Contributing Writer



Joseph F. Fox
1997-99



Conrad J. Nowicki
1999-00



Thomas J. King
2000-01



Michael J. Paquet
2001-02



Frederick W. Bunker
2007-08



Jeffrey Cruz
2008-09



Jeffrey S. Waters
2009-10



Brad Jorrey
2010-11



Steve McGlynn
1969-1970



Marty Jessen
1981-1982



Peter E. Davis
1993-94



Alfonso Daloisio Jr.
1995-97



Anthony C. Suppa
2002-03



Carl J. Cosenzo
2003-04



Leonardo DePinto
2004-05



Raymond J. Maffei
2005-07

In order to celebrate the 75th anniversary of the Associated General Contractors of New Jersey, Constructor Magazine sat down and listened to the thoughts, the opinions and most importantly, the wisdom of the AGC of NJ past presidents. Although at times their responses to our questions could not be more diverse, they all possessed a strong commitment to what is best for the industry – quality, safety and integrity. In his own way, each of these men has contributed his vision to the AGC of NJ; their influence, both individual and collective, continues to be felt today.

“The number one issue within the industry remains the lack of adequate funding for infrastructure at the national, state and local levels of government. Our infrastructure needs attention.”
– Brad Jorrey

“...all the benefits that the AGC of NJ could provide – an advocate in Trenton, a seat at the labor bargaining table, and a forum where individual contractors and associates could come face to face with not only their competitors, but also people that could complement or help their businesses.”
– Jeff Cruz

Focused Attention

A simple question: “*What was the main focus of your presidency,*” painted a precise picture of the construction community over time. Again and again, the former presidents recounted the same themes with one issue being mentioned most often. In the words of Brad Jorrey, AGC of NJ President 2010-11, “The number one issue within the industry and during my presidency was, and remains, the lack of adequate funding for infrastructure at the national, state and local levels of government. Our infrastructure needs attention.”

Specifically, with regard to funding, most of the presidents cite inadequate revenue to support the Transportation Trust Fund as problematic for the industry. Jorrey continues, “We are competing for dollars that are pulled hundreds of different ways. The dollars spent on infrastructure today compared to 1955 is 40 percent less. That compounded with the increased traffic that uses the facilities — whether it be an airport, a road, a bridge, a canal, a water line or an electric line — tells us we need to get to work on this.”

Taking the long view of the construction industry, as well as the AGC, Peter Davis, AGC of NJ President 1993-94 noted, “I don’t know that the major issues ever change. My father was president in 1974. I can remember the issues then: dealing with funding, unions and lawmakers in Trenton.” Jeff Maffei, AGC of NJ President 2005-07, supported that view while taking it further: “My term had two main focuses, the first was the Transportation Trust Fund and the second was speaking as one voice as an industry. Of course, we were also working toward issues in Trenton.”

The most important matter at hand during Tom King’s leadership term from 2000-01 was labor relations. “Negotiations were hard. But we always seemed to end with something fair – not on top, not on bottom, but in the middle. That is typical of the type of respect and compromise you see with the AGC of NJ and labor.” Conrad Nowicki, AGC of NJ President 1999-00, shares this perspective: “We were friendly with the unions. Ultimately, that helped us get a lot done together.”

Len DePinto, AGC of NJ President 2004-05, had a different take on the matter of focus. “Under my tenure, the main issue was improving the public image of contractors in the state.” To address this concern, AGC cultivated relationships with industry reporters and found opportunities to correct misrepresentations about contractors in news articles before they came to press. DePinto also believed safety was an aspect of the public relations message, promoting the idea that “AGC members are top contractors who produce quality work, safely.”

During a recessionary economy, as was the case throughout Jeff Cruz’s year as president (2008-09), “We were encouraging membership. And we were also pushing all the benefits that the AGC of NJ could provide — an advocate in Trenton, a seat at the labor bargaining table, and a forum where individual contractors and associates could come face to face with not only their competitors, but also people that could complement or help their businesses.”

Jeff Waters, AGC President 2009-10, shares Cruz’s view of the importance of membership in hard times, and was similarly passionate: “I knew the association needed to broaden its base and get more contractors involved. Knowing we were going into tough, recessionary times, people had an opportunity to spend their money any way they wanted. We needed to show AGC was the wisest choice.”

He believes that motivating individual members to participate in the AGC of NJ was the way he could best improve the organization — as well as the prospects of its members.

A Matter of Labor

A magnanimous group, to a man, each of the presidents thought of himself as piggybacking off prior presidents' accomplishments in the area of labor relations. Jeff Cruz confessed, "I was fortunate enough to follow Tony Suppa as chair of the Labor Committee, and he really laid the groundwork and showed me how to work with unions." Meanwhile, Tony Suppa, AGC of NJ President 2002-03, said, "I watched Joe Fox — he was excellent as Labor Committee Chairman. I learned from him how to negotiate."

"It's the special relationship with labor that makes AGC of NJ unique", said Al Daloisio, Jr., AGC of NJ President 1995-1997. Suppa added, "Labor relations is one of the most important things we do at AGC. We had good dialog with the unions and maintained that dialog so that when an issue came up, it was easily discussed and the result was normally fair for us and fair for the unions."

And yet behavioral nuances existed within this most important of relationships. As Cruz noted, "I did what I saw my father do — always show respect for the unions. After all, we depend on labor to make the business work. And labor depends on us to make their members prosper, so it's a unique relationship." A two-way street, the unions returned that respect, as well as the keen awareness of the interdependence of labor and contractors. As Mike Paquet, AGC of NJ President 2001-02 explained, "There were certain unions that only negotiated with the AGC of NJ." In this way, the organization often performed a difficult, yet necessary task for the entire industry by setting rates and conditions with these unions.

Joe Fox, AGC of NJ President 1997-99, stated: "As an AGC member, you knew going into negotiations that there was a partnership between us and the unions. And AGC members knew that we would lead the industry in negotiations."

The Evolution of Safety

"When I started in the business," Jorrey said, "There was no such thing as a hard hat, we didn't wear safety glasses, we didn't have guards on machinery, traffic control was in the dark ages, so we smartened up over the years and became more intelligent about it." Steve McGlynn, AGC of NJ President 1969-70 adds, "There's enough of a risk while you're working out there with no need for added danger."

Nowicki recalled, "I worked in the tunnels for 15 years over in New York and I think OSHA's regulations helped cut back on injuries in that business. Years ago they just dug a hole and stuck a piece of dynamite in, but now they have strict regulations. I believe OSHA's done a whole lot for the working men and women, especially in the tunnels."

All of the AGC's former presidents agreed with the increased emphasis on safety. Rick Bunker, AGC President 2007-2008 noted, "Safety has been pushed to the forefront of every project, as it should be. That wasn't always the case. Tom King added, "The increased focus on safety has saved a lot of lives."

Over the years, the AGC of NJ and unions have developed an important, mutually beneficial partnership on safety. Davis explains, "This issue was something we worked on with the unions. We evolved to fund safety training as part of the benefits packages, setting up funds to educate their members on safety issues, and more.

The opinion that a price is paid for safety was acknowledged by almost all. Carl Cosenzo, AGC President 2003-04, stated, "I'm a firm advocate of smart safety. We need the right balance. But safety always comes first."

"As an AGC member, you knew going into negotiations that there was a partnership between us and the unions. And AGC members knew that we would lead the industry in negotiations."

— Joe Fox

"It's the special relationship with labor that makes AGC of NJ unique."

— Al Daloisio, Jr.

"Safety has been pushed to the forefront of every project, as it should be. That wasn't always the case."

— Rick Bunker

The increased focus on safety has saved a lot of lives."

— Tom King

“We have no hesitation about taking young men and women into the business and helping them grow.”
– Carl Cosenzo

“This is where the AGC of NJ has always been vital. It plays an integral role in preventing poor regulation, increasing funding and preserving fairness in our industry.”
– Tony Suppa

Growing a Forest

A simple fact universally agreed upon is that the more skilled the worker, the more useful he or she will be to the team. “Continuing education is a priority for everyone, and the AGC makes it very easy to do with the training programs they sponsor,” said Daloisio.

The issue of education and development is not only central to the industry, but also significant within the AGC. Davis explained, “When you’re dealing with a union shop, you have a huge school. They train their people to operate. When you’re a union contractor, you call the union hall and request a guy who has certain skills.” Although by this definition, the AGC, being an organization of union contractors, should not need to educate or train, the matter has not always been that simple.

Maffei observed, “I think the AGC worked very closely with the unions on skill-sets. The industry knew it needed skilled workers. Contractors don’t always have the time to vet people for each job.” The organization, then, found itself compelled to take a more active role in union training in order to gain the specific kinds of skilled labor it required. “Today, we encourage and participate in training and jointly work together with the unions to educate workers,” Rick Bunker, AGC President 2007-08 adds.

Several former presidents discussed how they use education as an essential tool to promote the construction industry, noting that employment practices serve as the most significant form of training. Bunker noted, “We employ young engineers and then guide them through the industry.” Yet, Waters voiced his misgivings about the level of participation. “We’re doing a lot more than years ago, but, as an industry, we could do more toward getting young people involved. Cosenzo adds, “we have no hesitation about taking young men and women into the business and helping them grow.”

Cruz, who stated, “Our internship programs are the lifeblood of the future of our business,” supported this perspective. “It’s a smart investment. If you take a young adult and you’re paying \$16 an hour for the summer, you will get something out of him or her, and it also promotes our industry. It’s important that we plant those seeds every year in order to someday grow a forest.”

Working with Government

Although the former presidents believe the safety regulations have improved the industry, mixed feelings surround other governmental regulations.

Marty Jessen, AGC President 1981-82 observed, “I don’t know that the public knows how much overregulation is costing them. I once did a job for AT&T and we were filling in a swamp. Then we were told we had to rebuild the swamp. So I built the swamp... I was even moving frogs around. I don’t think anyone has any idea how much it costs or how ridiculous it can get.”

Waters weighed in: “Government regulations on small contractors are getting to where there’s just not going to be small contractors in another ten or fifteen years. You just can’t have these layers and layers and layers of regulations.” The difficulties surrounding smaller contractors is a common concern and, naturally, they see a stronger voice in Trenton as the most effective tool for addressing this issue.

“This is where the AGC of NJ has always been vital. It plays an integral role in preventing poor regulation, increasing funding and preserving fairness in our industry,” says Suppa. Daloisio stated, “AGC of NJ always maintained the ability to address issues with both sides of the aisle.” Cosenzo added “the quality of members and staff are reflected in the approach AGC takes in talking with government representatives.”

The Power of People

All the former presidents shared the view that, ultimately, the people make the AGC great. According to Maffei, “The egos are left at the door. People will posture at times, that’s their nature, but the posturing is limited. We all worked toward a common goal. I think everyone understood that we were trying to do what was the best for the industry.” Fox agreed, “The betterment of the industry is what’s on their minds.”

Expanding on this theme, Jessen adds, “At the AGC you met guys you could pick up the phone and get a straight answer.” Nowicki noted, “If you needed a piece of equipment, it would be at your disposal and there wasn’t anything about rental rates or contracts or anything like that.” Waters observed, “It’s one thing to be competitive with people, but we don’t have people fighting or suing or bitterness. If we bid a job properly, and someone else wins the bid, we’re happy for each other. We even share knowledge and go out of the way to lend advice and tools. I do not get the same feeling in other associations.”

Cruz adds, “I went to a Board meeting and I saw the camaraderie between the business owners. The AGC is unique in this way. We don’t always agree with each other, but at the end of each board meeting, we go in the same direction. There’s tremendous respect.”

Not to be forgotten, the AGC of NJ staff gets its due, as well. Daloisio is quick to point out: “We really do have a great staff in New Jersey. The experience and knowledge of the AGC of NJ team really is an asset to members and to everyone who has served as president of the organization.”

What’s Ahead for the AGC?

The one future concern shared by all was an increased presence in Trenton and Washington. Succinctly, Waters stated, “We need a stronger voice with government.” Cosenzo furthered this view, noting, “Infrastructure always has to be updated, we need to create new infrastructure, and we need to convince the government to fund it.”

McGlynn adds, “Funding issues are extremely important, our work in Trenton is important, and our labor relationship is important. We also need to get more young people into our business.” Maffei offered a similar though different viewpoint: “We need to strive for better and enhanced relationships with the government to make them understand how construction can be the solution to many of our states’ problems.”

Jorrey summed up what so many of the former presidents expressed: “We have to get our act together as a society to start spending money where it belongs, to keep the infrastructure where it needs to be, and to keep the economy continuing to prosper. The state of the infrastructure directly relates back to us as an industry. And without funding, without that relationship with the government, we’re in trouble. We are in the business of building and improving the lives of others, after all.”

Being involved with the AGC allows members to make a difference. Fox encourages, “I’d recommend to younger members that they get involved with the AGC. That’s where you learn a lot that will help you in your business. If you are active in the business, you need to be active in AGC.”

As the AGC celebrates its 75th year, it continues at the forefront of the industry, pushing for quality, safety and integrity within the field of construction. Going forward, the organization will maintain its commitment to the industry as it works toward creating stable funding for construction projects in the state, and serving as the voice of the heavy, highway, site development and utility construction industry in New Jersey.

Given its history of past accomplishments, the AGC will undoubtedly attain these goals. After all, as its many past presidents have demonstrated, the AGC is about committed people who work hard to make beneficial change.

“I went to a Board meeting and saw the camaraderie between the business owners. The AGC is unique in this way.....There’s tremendous respect.”

– Jeff Cruz

“We are in the business of building and improving the lives of others.”

– Brad Jorrey

“If you are active in the business, you need to be active in AGC.”

– Joe Fox