



President's message: On the road to rebuild and renew

March 20, 2009 - Spotlights

Planes, trains and automobiles recently delivered over 800 AIA chapter presidents, vice presidents, executive directors, and board members from around the country to Washington, D.C. where they gathered to urge members of Congress to direct stimulus funding toward well-planned, sustainable construction and development, and not merely "shovel-ready" projects.

Traditionally, every year AIA leaders converge in Washington to attend the Grassroots Leadership & Legislative Conference. During the conference, members head to Capitol Hill to meet with their legislators to communicate the importance of the AIA issues agenda and strengthen relationships between Congress and the architectural profession.

This year the New York AIA chapter delegation, which included Tony Schirripa, Rick Bell, Laura Manville, Margaret Castillo, Venesa Alicea, Mary Burke, Terrence O'Neal, Burt Roslyn, Margery Perlmutter and myself made the trek and joined the throng at the Grand Hyatt Hotel. Throughout the four-day "AIA Grassroots" event, the attendees were trained by professional lobbyists and political leaders about the importance of concerted and enduring lobbying efforts in effecting change, how a proposal moves from an idea to proposed legislation, and how one "makes the ask" of an elected official.

The conference officially began with the AIA National leadership detailing advocacy positions that AIA members would take to Congress. The positions were aimed at creating more work in the construction industry and, by extension, in the architecture industry, and on improving existing legislation affecting architects. In addition to encouraging Congress to approve funding for projects that would have a more enduring impact on the quality of life in our communities and provide longer-term opportunity for employment in the construction industry, the AIA platform also recommended an increase in the federal tax deduction already available to incentivize investment in energy-efficient commercial buildings, an increase in funding to public transportation planning initiatives, and the elimination of fee-retainage rules as applied to architects for federally-funded projects.

A host of motivational speakers offered pointers on what we should expect at our meetings with Congress. In particular, they explained that we were unlikely to meet with officials directly, as House Democrats had been called unexpectedly to attend an emergency "retreat," presumably to discuss the stalled stimulus package. Instead, and perhaps to greater benefit, we would meet with the aides and chiefs-of-staff of the electeds, who were likely to be well-informed about the areas we would be discussing with them, would take copious notes, ask intelligent questions, make useful suggestions, and report all that they had learned from us to their Congressperson. We were also educated on the method of "the ask:" on the importance of precisely articulating, after a short explanation and background, what specifically we were requesting that the Congressperson do (sponsor a bill, change a rule, make a revision to a bill already under consideration on the floor) and how such

action would benefit the officials' constituency.

Futurist David Zack encouraged us not to "think outside of the box," which would leave us weary and alone, but to "get inside of someone else's box" as a way of linking and communicating seemingly disparate and divergent ideas. Over the course of the event, we were scolded often about the profession's inability to convey its broad knowledge and understanding to anyone beyond the cognoscenti. To be effective advocates, we would have to sharpen new communication skills.

Over the course of the next few days, we heard from speakers from the AIA Advocacy Federal Relations team who brought us up to date on the status of the construction-spending aspects of the stimulus package that had been debated on the Senate floor the night before. AIA advocates were advised to call and send emails to their senators urging them to ensure that construction-related funding remained in the package. News was out that green initiatives and education spending, in particular, were at risk and it was our job to do something about it.

At Capital Hill, we met with our regional representatives. The New York Chapter's 12 delegates assembled for their meeting at Representative Nydia Velazquez's office. Velazquez, Democrat from New York's 12th Congressional District (Lower Manhattan, portions of Brooklyn and Queens) is chair of the House Small Business Committee and senior member of the Financial Services Committee, which concerns itself with housing and community development. Our presentation to Velazquez's responsive aide included: Construction of well-planned, well-considered projects will create jobs over the long term for more New Yorkers and more small business owners; funding should be directed toward affordable housing development, school construction, and sustainable development; tax incentives should be increased significantly to encourage owners to retrofit existing office buildings to meet sustainability standards; existing AmeriCorps programs should be expanded to include a DesignCorps to employ architects and engineers to assess and plan the retrofitting of federal buildings. Since small business development and affordable housing are of particular interest in Velazquez's district, most of our points resonated with her aide who encouraged us to invite Velazquez to upcoming events at the Center for Architecture.

When we spoke with the aides to Anthony Weiner (Democrat from the 9th District, parts of Queens and Brooklyn) and Eliot Engel (Democrat from the 17th District, Bronx and parts of Westchester), we delivered similar messages and received enthusiastic feedback.

We were extremely fortunate, however, to meet with Representative Carolyn Maloney herself (Democrat from the 14th District, East Side Manhattan and Queens). Our delegation focused its message on its belief that our proposed initiatives would create the greatest number of jobs, not just in N.Y., but throughout the country. Maloney was sympathetic and well-acquainted with the number of construction-related jobs that have been and will be produced by the Second Ave. subway and the East Side Access "mega-projects." She encouraged us to provide her with more specific data on the DesignCorps, sustainable retrofit incentives, and federal retainer issues.

Although the stimulus bill that Congress eventually approved did not fund the scope of construction projects we had rallied for, we remain determined and hopeful that our continued efforts on behalf of our industry will make a difference.

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