



State Societies Build Political Capital

Through advocacy efforts, professional engineers are making their presence known in their state legislatures.

BY DANIELLE BOYKIN

All across this nation, various constituent groups and organizations head to state capitals to advocate for their cause and engage in the political process. They send e-mails, make phone calls, and participate in activities that will help them to inform and influence elected officials. Infrastructure spending, licensure laws and regulations, industrial exemptions, and engineering education are just a few of the issues that are being discussed and voted on during legislative sessions. Professional engineers, with the backing of their state societies and NSPE, are a key part of this engagement.

For more than 40 years, the Florida Engineering Society has held a legislative day event in Tallahassee. The event continues to grow and has become an essential component to the society's legislative and government relations program. "We are most proud of the continued strong attendance by our student chapters and the members of our leadership institute," says Peter Moore, P.E., chair of the society's Commission on Legislative and Government Relations. "These students and up and coming leaders get exposed to the importance of influencing the legislative process with good sound arguments. They are experts that legislators need to make critical decisions."

Outside of the annual legislative program, FES maintains a political action committee and a leadership council to allow individual members to participate financially in the process. "We also encourage our members to continue relationships with legislators back home in their districts and for the society as a whole to stay consistent with our approach and methodology," says Moore.

For nearly 25 years, Kansas has been in a uniquely good position with its transportation system. The Kansas Society of Professional Engineers is working to keep it that way. "Our state highway system has ranked in the top five of best systems in the nation for several consecutive years," says Ron Gaches, KSPE executive director. "Most of us that are involved in infrastructure are proud of that."

Gaches attributes this quality to the state's comprehensive transportation plan, Transportation Works for Kansas (TWORKS), which has provided a dedicated revenue stream for the Kansas Department of Transportation programs. The state is currently in the middle of its third consecutive

10-year plan. However, with years of budget deficits and a projected \$600 million deficit for the next fiscal year, the TWORKS program is being eyed as a revenue source for the general fund by both the legislature and the governor's office. "We have had legislators say, 'Why do we have to be ranked as the top five transportation state? That's expensive,'" he says. "Why don't we spend less and be in the top 10 or top 20 for transportation systems?"

Gaches is focused on maintaining a solid working relationship with the governor's office, based on the premise that both KSPE and the governor want a transportation system that saves lives and promotes jobs. "A working relationship with the administration will allow us to be on the inside of the room at the end of the session, when they are making the hard choices on how to balance the budget," he explains. "If we are overtly critical we would likely end up on the outside, frustrated, and without any way to influence the outcome."

Building Political Capital

Building political capital has been a top priority for KSPE. This requires that the society is firm in supporting its agenda without harsh criticism of the governor or legislators. "We activate our grass roots and rally against those cuts, but we don't make personal attacks on policy makers that are responsible for these initiatives. That's a really important distinction," says Gaches. "We don't like the cuts, but at the end of the day we are going to have many other issues to deal with in the legislature. We don't want to burn any bridges."

While participation in legislative days can be effective for many organizations, KSPE has spent the last several years growing its grass roots strategy. The society assists its local chapters in hosting events outside of the legislative session with area legislators. Four of its seven chapters hosted events during the 2014 election season. Gaches, who makes a legislative agenda presentation at the chapter events, believes it's more effective to help individual members to develop their own political capital. "A legislator is much more likely to respond to a constituent contact than a lobbyist contact," he says. "The strength of the organization doesn't come from my contacts in the state house, rather it comes from the nature of the relationships that all of our members have with their legislators."

It's up to NSPE and the state society leadership, says Gaches, to reduce any negative opinions associated with lobbying and remind members how dramatically the legislature and state government impacts their profession. "If they don't participate in the process, then they leave the decision making to other organizations that do participate in the policymaking," he says. "The only way that your view is going to be heard is if you speak up."

Finding Your Voice

In 2000, Nebraska passed term limits for members of its unicameral legislature. This change has made the Nebraska Society of Professional Engineers' annual legislative luncheon and outreach initiatives more critical than ever, says Executive Director Katy Boggs. "There are always new faces that come in and they may not know about the engineering industry or what a licensed engineer does," she says. "It's important to be in constant communication and provide them with resources. You have to find your voice in this crowd and get your name out there."

In an effort to raise the volume of that voice, this year's legislative event in January sought to maximize the power of the professional engineering community. The Nebraska Society partnered with the Nebraska Professional Engineers Coalition. "This was a big change so that we aren't one voice. It's our whole coalition," says Boggs. PEC represents the society, the American Society of Civil Engineers, the Professional Surveyors Association of Nebraska, the Structural Engineers Association of Nebraska, and the American Society of Mechanical Engineers.

The Nebraska coalition also gained the attendance of a high-profile guest, Governor Pete Ricketts. "Traditionally, we host the legislative luncheon in hopes that the governor or lieutenant governor will attend," she says. "This year was a particular win, because Nebraska has a new governor for the first time since 2005."

The legislative engagement didn't stop with the annual luncheon. The Nebraska Society maximized its outreach efforts during Engineers Week in February by delivering cookies shaped like pocket protectors to each state senator's office. "We work really hard to pair our members with their senators, so they will be comfortable contacting them when issues arise in the future," says Boggs.



Voter Voice Legislative Action Center

Through the resources available at the Voter Voice Legislative Action Center, NSPE members are able to identify and contact their federal, state, and local elected officials about issues important to them as engineers. From the latest Voter Voice Legislative Action Center alerts highlighting key legislation currently before Congress to bill tracking, voting records, and even information on registering to vote and tips for communicating effectively with legislators.

NSPE-PAC

NSPE-PAC is a bipartisan political action committee that enables NSPE employees and members to combine their political contributions and support candidates who support the engineering profession. In accordance with federal law, only individual Society members and NSPE staff management can contribute to NSPE-PAC and they must be U.S. citizens.

Visit www.nspe.org/resources/issues-and-advocacy for more information on getting involved in the political process and advocating for the professional engineering community.

Advocating for the engineering profession isn't just about cookies and socializing over a meal. The Nebraska Society's executive board typically meets every other week to review bills when the legislature is in session. During the recent term, the society focused its attention on legislation that clarifies licensure language, particularly with the practice of landscape architects, and addresses the early taking of the PE exam. Legislation didn't pass in the previous session and has been reintroduced in this current session. "We were able to work with the Nebraska Board of Engineers and Architects and meet with key groups during the break to make the changes to the bill that would allow us to go

from an opposition position to a proponent position," says Boggs. "It's in committee right now and has gotten further in the [legislative] process than the previous bill."

A Fast-Paced Moving World

Since 2007, the Nebraska Society has worked with Kissel/E&S Associates to strengthen its lobbying efforts. Because Nebraska has a unicameral legislature, the legislative process moves very quickly, says Boggs. "They help us to navigate and translate what's going on during the session and to be proactive about these issues," she says. "If you miss something, then you may not get a chance to testify, then sadly your voice isn't heard. It's a fast-paced, moving world at the legislature."

The Professional Engineers of Oregon recently learned just how quickly state societies and NSPE members have to move to deal with legislation that could have a significant effect on licensed engineering practice. In January, legislation was introduced to revise and clarify qualifications for registration to practice professional engineering, land surveying, or photogrammetric mapping. The bill (S.B. 297) also seeks to allow the Oregon State Board of Examiners for Engineering and Land Surveying to establish alternative degree requirements and allow an FE exam waiver for an engineer who has held an engineering license in another jurisdiction for 25 years or more.

PEO took action when they were notified of efforts to include two amendments to reduce the years of licensure to eight to qualify for the FE exam waiver and to change a single word in the bill that could ultimately limit the board's discretion when reviewing the credentials of licensure candidates, particularly foreign candidates.

The society reached out to the senate committee chairs and teamed up with other members of the Oregon Design Professionals. Michael Hardy, P.E., F.NSPE, a past president of NSPE, testified as a licensee to explain the potential impact of the amendments. "I used the knowledge I gained about international licensure, while serving as NSPE's president to explain that a change of just a minor word will result in a major change in regulating engineering licensure and that wasn't a good thing to do."

Oregon professional engineers gained an immediate victory. The two amendments were removed from the legislation. Hardy believes this situation offers lessons on

two important issues that the professional engineering community must face. One, legislators and the general public need more information on how professional engineers contribute to society and protect the public welfare. Two, licensing boards need professional engineers to advocate for them in their state legislatures.

"In my experience, legislators are often good and well-intentioned people. But they may not understand some of the nuances of a bill's language because they don't understand engineering licensure," says Hardy. "We often say that the public doesn't understand engineering. For the most part, state legislators are the public. They aren't typically long-term professional politicians. They have full-time jobs back in their district."

Hardy adds, "Our licensing board cannot lobby for or against changes to licensure laws. They need someone else to carry that flag. Once our statutes are opened up, almost anybody can come along and do something to them."

PEO and other state societies are pushing to let legislators know that there are professional engineers who can serve as a resource on engineering and technical issues. "I don't think engineers give themselves enough credit for what they do and how they do it," says Hardy. "We are used to speaking in public environments on technical issues. We need to carry that into the legislative and political arena."

Change Through Engagement

The industrial exemption is at the top of the Pennsylvania Society of Professional



FLORIDA ENGINEERING SOCIETY MEMBERS TOUR THE OLD STATE CAPITOL DURING THE SOCIETY'S 2015 LEGISLATIVE DAYS EVENT IN TALLAHASSEE.

Engineers' legislative agenda. Last year, the society backed a bill that would put an end to the exemption, but it failed to gain traction as the legislative session came to a close. John Nawn, P.E., chair of PSPE's government and legislative affairs committee, says professional engineers must realize that making critical change through the legislative process requires intense engagement and tenacity. With a new session that started in January, PSPE will be advocating to reintroduce the legislation. "We learned this past year that maybe this won't be as tough of a haul this time around as we initially thought it would be," says Nawn. "Certainly there is going to be opposition from some manufacturing and industry groups, but we haven't noticed a strong political backlash from this. We are garnering more support from other design professionals."

PSPE hosts a legislative day event annually in the spring. Professional engineers need to increase their participation similar to other constituent groups, says Nawn. "Every year we go to the legislature, there are always five to six other groups. They have huge numbers of attendees and are all wearing the same t-shirts," he says. "We have got to do the same thing. We have got to capture the legislators' attention."

Increased collaboration with other engineering societies, says Nawn, is one way to attract their attention. "We shouldn't get bogged down in what 'message' we deliver as long as it's related to engineers and engineering," he says. "We should all be there at the capitol. The only way that we are going to make an impact while we are there is in sheer numbers."

Nawn believes that it's also important for professional engineers to influence the political and legislative process by serving in elected positions on the local and state levels. He has served as a member of his town's board of supervisors for the past four years. "I don't have any political aspirations beyond serving on the board, but I believe in community service," he says. "When we have our meetings, there's my name tag with my PE designation so the residents can see it. They know that I'm a professional engineer."

Nawn understands that not every professional engineer will feel inclined to run for elected office. Yet, he's adamant that professional engineers, as constituents, must speak out about issues that are important. "It's about getting involved and not being afraid to



FLORIDA ENGINEERING SOCIETY MEMBERS, THE FLORIDA ENGINEERING LEADERSHIP INSTITUTE CLASS, AND FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY AND UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA STUDENTS MEET WITH STATE REP. JOSE FELIX DIAZ (CENTER, WEARING GRAY SUIT).

talk to your legislators," he says. "Remember, you elected them and put them in that role. Just be polite and professional, but clear and firm about what you expect them to do."

Gaches agrees that if PEs aren't going to run for office they should support a candidate who best represents their values and interests through NSPE's and their state society's political action committees. "Every PE needs to understand that they have a professional designation that has been created by state government that can be removed or altered by state government," he says. "If you're really interested in the future of your profession, you should be involved in the process that protects and enhances your licensure."

Picking Your Battles

Engineers often see the world in black and white, says communications consultant Nick Walters, however, the world of politics is stark with shades of gray. This difference can greatly affect how professional engineers engage with elected officials. "The world of government and politics is full of gray. Sometimes the gray is light and sometimes it's darker," he says. There's just a different perspective. It's important that when you're trying to communicate with them, that you understand the world that they live in."

Walters recently hosted a seminar during the Mississippi Engineering Society's recent annual meeting, where he shared advice on how engineers can communicate effectively with elected and appointed officials.

Professional engineers have to focus on the best ways to present their concerns and

influence policymakers to move forward, without getting frustrated, says Walters. "You can't get frustrated with the process and assume that someone in the legislature or on a board will follow your logic," he says. "You're not always going to get your way. You have to pick the hill that you want to die on because you can't win all of the battles. It takes time to move things through the government and legislative process."

One way to alleviate potential frustration is to realize that in the world of politics, logic will not always matter. Just because something makes sense, you can't always assume that logic will prevail, says Walters. "There are many reasons that can determine what makes an official want to move forward or not move forward on a particular project," he says. "For example, it may be that a project will require going through a constituent's property. The official won't vote to enact eminent domain on the property because it might not be a politically smart thing to do."

It's also important that PEs understand the needs of legislators and officials before engaging them, whether it's about an infrastructure project or a piece of legislation. Figure out what drives them to make certain decisions. "Their constituents want to know that they are being good stewards of the taxpayer dollar," says Walter. "They have a responsibility to communicate to their constituents what's going on, whether it's the status of a road getting built or a bridge being repaired. The more that you can help them communicate with their constituents, the better off it will be for you." PE