



Influencing Legislation at the National level

We Have an Obligation to Get Involved

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Chances are you have very strong opinions about how this country is being run. We all do. While our ability to influence what is being done seems to be limited to voting every couple of years, we can do more. We can contribute to the campaigns of people we believe will lead the country properly. We can stay informed and let our representatives know our positions through personal visits, calls, and emails. Finally, we can work with the government affairs offices of our professional associations and help them to effectively lobby on our behalf.

Our elected officials listen carefully to those who elect them. You have the ear of your Representative and your Senator. When you speak as an expert on an issue they are considering, they listen very carefully. We don't have to sit still and *hope* that the right thing is done – by actively engaging we can help to shape the outcome. We have a credible voice and need to speak up.

I believe that we have an obligation to proactively bring our expertise to bear on the issues that we understand and that affect us. Very recently, Structural Engineers testified before Congress about the I35 bridge collapse. As structural engineers, we have unique insight into the design and construction process and how it should be regulated. We know what's working and what's not. Qualifications-Based Selection, funding for critical infrastructure improvements, tax issues affecting design firms, funding for research and code development are just a few of the things that are working. Frivolous lawsuits, lawsuits against volunteer post di-

saster inspectors, and the Bush Administration's termination of most of the natural hazard mitigation programs are a few of the things that are not working. Even though the country seems to be consumed with the war and the impact of sub-prime loans, there are thousands of other issues being debated and decided every session. Many of these issues affect us, and need our attention.

If you have ever tried to advance a legislative issue, you know that you need a lot of people to join in to have an impact, and you need professional lobbying help. Fortunately for us, this kind of help is available from within both ACEC, CASE's sponsoring organization, and ASCE which houses SEI. Both ACEC and ASCE have government affairs programs that involve large staffs and a strong understanding of the legislative process. Steve Hall at ACEC, and Brian Pallasch at ASCE, lead the government affairs activities for their respective organizations. Both have worked on the Hill, have numerous contacts and, more important, the ability to influence what is going on. They each have a good sense of what works, what is likely to change, and how we can best leverage our talents to get what is needed. They also stay in contact and work to leverage the power of speaking on behalf of over 250,000 engineers and engineering firms nationwide.

CASE, with its focus on firm management and advocacy, has a Legislative committee. Chaired by Eric Thorkildsen, they are actively pursuing legislation at the national level. Under Steve Hall's guidance, they are currently tracking issues related to the need to improve the inspection of existing bridge structures, capping punitive damages, establishing protection against frivolous lawsuits, protection for Good Samaritan acts related to post disaster volunteer inspection, and restarting natural hazard mitigation. These issues are among the dozens that ACEC is working on.

Please make a visit to the ACEC web site at www.acec.org/advocacy to get more

information on the organization's legislative agenda. I should add that ACEC also has a very effective and growing political program through ACEC/PAC, giving us a vital tool to elect House and Senate members who share our views on the key issues facing the industry.

The CASE legislative committee meets monthly by conference call, twice annually face to face and once in Washington DC to join the ACEC delegates walking the halls of congress and advocating our positions. New members are always welcome. Please contact David Bixby at ACEC if you are interested in joining.

ASCE also has a portfolio of legislative initiatives that they are pursuing. Because they represent all disciplines within Civil Engineering, the list is very broad. These can be found at www.asce.org/govrel/govrel2.cfm. Check out ASCE's policy statements for a taste of the multitude of areas that need our attention. More importantly, sign up to become a "key Contact" and use the ASCE web site as an easy way to quickly make your self heard.

CASE is one of three organizations that represent the interests of Structural Engineers at the National level. CASE remains focused on issues surrounding firms and their business practices, SEI serves as the training, research and development arm of our associations with direct focus on the needs individual practitioners and researchers, NCSEA continues to knit together our state SEA's and remains focused on licensing, public relations, and code development. We need to add legislative advocacy to the list of tasks we need to pursue, and lift our professional standing and bring all of our colleagues to a similar level of practice. ■

