



What's the Plan?

By David R. Horos, P.E., S.E., LEED AP

“What’s the Plan?” ~Anonymous

“Make no small plans; they have no magic to stir men’s blood.” ~Daniel Burnham

“Plan the work and work the plan.” ~Jeff McCarthy, former Skidmore, Owings & Merrill LLP (SOM) Managing Partner

“Plans are of little importance, but planning is essential.” ~Winston Churchill

These are a few sayings and quotes that we have probably all heard over the years. Some of us love planning, while others despise it, and still others oscillate between the two. Either way, the time has come for NCSEA to refresh our strategic plan. We undertook the most recent effort at the end of 2014, producing a plan in 2015; we created the plan before that in 2011. This recent four-year pattern suggests that now is the time.

During my tenure on the SEAIO (Illinois) and NCSEA Boards of Directors, I have had the fortune (or not) of participating in what will now be a third strategic planning effort for a structural engineering organization. I have attempted to learn about vision and mission statements and found myself confused multiple times by the varieties of jargon and formats associated with strategic plans. While this by no means makes me an expert, my experience leads me to approach our upcoming effort in ways that are markedly different from my previous efforts.

I now enter with cautious rather than unbridled optimism, and I am more aware of how much work can be required to navigate the process successfully. This includes honest self-reflection, thorough engagement of diverse stakeholders, creative and visionary thinking, clear documentation and communication of the results, and – most importantly – execution moving forward. I am also aware that the best intentions can fall short if even just one of the above is lacking. That is not to say that a plan will not emerge, but rather that a plan may not be what it otherwise *could* be. Most of all, I will stick with the adage, “you get out of it what you put into it.”

While not involved in NCSEA’s 2015 effort, I was encouraged to see that it included a mission statement focused on “representing and strengthening its Member Organizations.” This may seem obvious, and maybe even trivial, but it properly reflects NCSEA’s unique structure. Comprised of 44 associations, NCSEA serves as an umbrella organization for this diverse group which represents states as large as California or Texas and as small as Wyoming or Rhode Island. Thus, NCSEA will always present unique challenges for developing a strategic plan. I have observed the 2015 mission statement in action over the last few years at the annual Summit Delegate sessions, NCSEA’s periodic visits to MOs, and ongoing activities such as the free monthly MO webinars. For these reasons alone, I would call the results of the 2015 plan a success.

Now is the time to continue to build on that success. Last year, three board members worked with Al Spada, our Executive Director, to identify, solicit proposals and qualifications, interview, and select

a facilitator to help guide us through the effort. After presentations to and discussions with the full board, we selected and engaged Association Laboratory, Inc. We were interested in, and excited by, their focus on “fact-based advice, critical thinking, and creative

insights” as well as “peer-based industry research”; after all, what engineer would *not* be attracted to such research and data?

We then formed a steering committee and started collecting data, both on our peer organizations through Association Laboratory’s research, and through an initial survey of the steering committee itself. This information will be used to

create a survey to be sent to a broader audience. All such preparation leads to a retreat in July, which will end with a draft strategic plan to be followed by the final plan. Association Laboratory will provide support for a year following the retreat to help, as needed, with decisions related to the implementation of the plan.

At a little over 25 years old, NCSEA is still a relatively young organization. A number of member organizations (MO’s) predate our formation, and ASCE was founded in 1852. NCSEA is continuing to mature and grow. We have attempted to select participants for the retreat that include a healthy mix of constituents, from a variety of MO’s, a variety of roles within NCSEA and MO’s, and related non-members, including NCSEA staff, an MO Executive Director, and a vendor representative.

We expect this group to provide the creativity, vision, and diversity of viewpoints necessary to identify both shortcomings and opportunities, as well as help to develop strategies and tactics – explaining the difference between those two would require another article – to continue to move NCSEA forward. However, we are also looking forward to receiving input from *you* as part of the upcoming survey process. Please look for more information on the timing of the survey, once we finish developing it and make it available.

“Life is what happens to us while we are making other plans.” (*Alan Saunders, newspaper comic strip writer; not John Lennon, although a similar version is in his 1980 song, “Beautiful Boy”*) I hope that this upcoming process will be my most successful involvement in strategic planning to date. If only I would make the time for such a rigorous *personal* strategic plan. Maybe I can tackle that four years from now. “If you don’t know where you are going, you’ll end up someplace else.” (*Yogi Berra*)



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