

Five Years Later, Working Together Is Still Working

By Tim Dietz – SSA VP, Communications & Government Relations

It started in the City of Brotherly Love, the same place where representatives from the colonial territories had met more than 200 years ago to hash out what would eventually become the United States. Dozens of professionals from various state and international self storage associations, including operators, executives and vendors, met in Philadelphia during the 2005 Spring Conference & Trade Show to consider a better way of working—in unison.

Five years after the SSA sat down with self storage leaders to consider a fresh approach to national and state association relations, the industry is seeing significant benefits from the Affiliated Association Council (AAC), which now is made up of 25 state associations and four international organizations. Next month members of these organizations will meet as

they do at each SSA conference, to consider the latest developments and plan for what's ahead.

Relatively informal relationships among the national and state associations had been established previous to 2005; however, the SSA board of directors, many of whom had sat on state association boards already, saw great potential in a more formal arrangement. In creating the affiliation program, the SSA hoped to bridge communication gaps between the many state associations and the national Association, promoting a collaborative environment where common goals could be pursued together.

“There needs to be close interaction between the national Self Storage Association and the state organizations,” said Michael T. Scanlon, Jr.,

SSA president and CEO, “it is vital that the work of all associations for our respective members is effective and efficient...we must get key legislative and educational work done without wasting a nickel of dues money. The formation of the Affiliated Associations Council (AAC) is proof positive that working together gets the job done...without duplicating effort or overspending,” Scanlon added.

To begin, the SSA invited input from all the established state association leaders. The participants who helped to draft the SSA affiliation agreement voiced many common needs: better communications, networking opportunities, administrative support and lobbying capabilities.

The SSA board was particularly keen on the idea of sharing those resources

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unique to different associations. For example, the Association had already established a non-profit magazine, designed to inform and update its thousands of members about important developments around the country. Affiliates have taken advantage of dedicated space in the *SSA Globe* since the program's inception, resulting in an open channel for communications between all of the state associations.

Sharing ideas regularly has led to many tangible improvements, both for those participating organizations and within the arenas of business where the industry operates. "Each state association has different needs in terms of support," said AAC chair Erin King, executive director of the California SSA. "The Affiliated Associations Council allows states to take the aspects they can use most, regardless of how big or small a request."

AAC and LIF

Perhaps nowhere else has the collaborative efforts between the associations resulted in more success than in the area of government affairs. All of the groups involved from the beginning listed lobbying and regulatory concerns as one of their primary purposes. It was evident that if the industry didn't define itself, others less-familiar with the business could make a mess of things. By 2005, the SSA had established a fund to support lobbying efforts nationally,

but it lacked "soldiers in the capitals," so to speak. The SSA had great expertise and was gathering a war chest, while the state associations were able to mobilize members in grassroots campaigns to take advantage of their connections at the state capitals.

As the SSA Legislative Issues Fund (LIF) was used to fund various campaigns throughout the country, it became apparent that the legislative demands had grown to such an extent that a more formal structure was needed. A lobbyist was brought on staff to oversee the program nationally, and the Legislative & Regulatory Advisory Committee began meeting annually to consider targets.

John Gilliland, who had sat on the Pennsylvania SSA board of directors for a number of years, was on the SSA board at the beginning and throughout the affiliation process and was chairman of the Association in 2007.

"Before the AAC, I think there was a lot of mystery among the various associations about each other," said Gilliland, the president of York, Pennsylvania-based Investment Real Estate Management. "The industry was still relatively young. As these groups all grew separately, they learned many lessons separately. We felt the AAC was a good way to speed up that learning process, not just for the newer associations, but for all of the associations that could benefit from the experiences of others," he said.

Success in Numbers

During the past three years alone the SSA, through the LIF, has funded more than 25 efforts to either modernize existing regulations or battle threatening measures in affiliated states. Only a handful of these campaigns have failed or remain open-ended. The SSA has also worked outside of the affiliation program in certain cases, for example where there is no state association.

Laws that have been established from scratch or have been improved include late fee regulations, lien laws, vehicle lien provisions and privacy regulations. The SSA has also been alert for measures that could damage the ability of businesses to equitably conduct business, whether through taxes or ill-conceived, burdensome regulations.

In Michigan, for example, enormous state budget shortfalls led to a potential tax on self storage two years ago. It was beaten back with aggressive lobbying by the Michigan SSA with the aid of the national SSA.

"What benefits us the most about the affiliation program, aside from the monetary support, is not having to reinvent the wheel," according to Tim DeWitt, executive director of the Michigan SSA. "By seeing what everyone else has already experienced, more energy can be focused on getting things done right the first time, in the most efficient manner. It's a truly value-added relationship." ❖



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