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55 YEARS

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RIBA focused on education to weather the economic storm

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It was a year to hone the skills of any business person, especially in the shelter industry. And with every piece of glum economic news came word of another RIBA member who was creating a new niche or turning an economic challenge into an opportunity.

In January, for example, Providence Business News honored Saint John Stone, a specialty stone supplier based in North Kingstown, with a 2008 Business Excellence Award. The company, founded only in 2005, had taken its business far beyond a sluggish R.I. residential housing sector to embrace new markets as far away as Las Vegas, Asia and even Russia, seeing annual revenue growth of 760% in its first three years.

Drawing praise from East Providence planners in the spring was the successful mill rehabilitation project known as the Rumford Center, a mixed-use development spearheaded by two RIBA members: The Peregrine Group and Kirkbrae Development Corp.

The green scene

"Green" building and remodeling took center stage as a major bright spot in the housing market for 2009. That trend solidified with the announcement that the National Association of Home Builders' National Green Building Standard (NGBS) for all residential construction work, including single-family homes, apartments and condos, land development, and remodeling and renovation, was approved January 29th by the American National Standards Institute (ANSI).

Many members took advantage of this trend to find new niches and improve business. As 2009 came to a close, for example, David Caldwell Jr. of Caldwell & Johnson Inc. was in North Kingstown completing the first house in the state to achieve high "green" ratings with NGBS and with its two competing green standards.

Regulatory issues

Builders weren't the only ones embracing "green" trends. Regulators were too, with particular emphasis on "low-impact design" (LID) requirements for new construction in some areas. Mid-year, significant revisions were announced to the R.I. Storm Water Design and Installation Standards Manual, which will have a heavy impact on builders and developers. At year-end, RIBA's comments were under consideration by the Dept. of Environmental Management and the Coastal Resources Management Council.

Revisions as they stood at year-end could add significantly to design and construction costs when it comes to handling storm water runoff. RIBA continued to monitor the situation as 2010 began.

Education

RIBA as a whole undertook to help members get through the challenging times, and a primary tool was education. Members were reminded that even a time of slow business had at least one compensation: It allowed more time for education and self improvement in preparation for when things picked up.

In the fall, the association announced creation of the RIBA Institute, coordinating all classes and seminars.

Back in January, Education and Workforce Development Committee chairman Robert Baldwin had outlined a two-pronged approach to education for the industry: a program of education and certification for members, and continued support for student construction programs around the state. Many members took advantage of classes throughout the year, including the Hoisting Pre-Licensing Class and OSHA 10-Hour Certification Training, along with NAHB classes to earn the new Certified Green Professional (CGP) designation. Other classes included estimating, insurance for contractors, business management, "green" building, and customer service.

Baldwin and RIBA development coordinator Joanne DiGregorio joined Paul McConnell, project manager of the Perkins Grant, going "on the road" to support student construction programs and student building projects throughout the state. By the end of the year, with state and municipal school budgets tightening, efforts had become focused on programs that were endangered by cuts.

Legislation

As in previous years, RIBA continued its efforts to educate state lawmakers about the industry and to avoid legislation harmful to members. Early in the year, the association announced its own "housing stimulus package," consisting of four key bills submitted for the 2009 General Assembly session.

This campaign became partially successful when the General Assembly in October passed legislation "stopping the clock" on state and local approvals until June 30, 2011.

RIBA did its part on the federal level, too, in attempts to preserve the home mortgage interest deduction and avoid union-backed "card check" legislation. On March 24th, RIBA immediate past president Thomas McNulty and vice president Robert Baldwin participated in the NAHB 2009 Legislative Conference in Washington, D.C. Both men met with senators Jack Reed and Sheldon Whitehouse personally, and with staffers from the offices of congressmen Patrick Kennedy and James Langevin.

Subsequently, McNulty and RIBA executive director Roger Warren met with Reed on the importance of extending and expanding the federal home buyer tax credit.

Workers' compensation

Throughout the year, Workers' Compensation Committee chairman Kenneth Jones and his panel worked hard to build a new insurance program for members in the transition away from Beacon Mutual Insurance Co. By fall, RIBA had an alliance with Massc-based Renaissance Group, and a flexible insurance program was in the works.

Members honored

Singled out for special honors in 2009 were Felix Carlone of F.A. Carlone & Sons and Edgar Ladouceur of the Stormtite Co., Inc. In February, they received the attorney general Roberts Award for Consumer Protection for their service on the R.I. Contractors' Registration and Licensing Board (CRLB). Both members of RIBA, the two men serve as chairman and vice chairman, respectively, of the CRLB.

Annual Clambake and Golf Classic

Highlight of RIBA's social year is the Annual Outing and Clambake. The 2009 event took place August 14th, once again at Francis Farm, Rehoboth, Mass. Along with the usual fun, food, contests and events, members were introduced to a new sport: "insulation tossing," courtesy of Anchor Insulation & Co., Inc.

RIBA golfers turned out at Crystal Lake Golf Club, Harrisville, on a rainy September 11th as RIBA held its Annual Golf Classic. Play was called after nine holes because of the weather, but participants nevertheless enjoyed the buffet dinner, raffle prizes and awards.

Commitment to members

As President Michael C. Artesani Sr. and his team entered their second term in October, they vowed continued support for members on all levels, especially at the State House, through education, and in providing every possible tool for members to meet the economic challenges of the year.

"RIBA membership is one of the best investments contractors and suppliers can make in their businesses," he said.

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