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If you stay the same you fall behind: We must change

November 10, 2010 - Rhode Island

This is based on president Baldwin's inaugural remarks at the annual meeting of the Rhode Island Builders Association, held at the Alpine Country Club, Cranston, on October 5th.

I am honored and humbled to take office as the 34th president of the Rhode Island Builders Association. My family has been in construction and agriculture for generations. My grandfather, who was in agriculture at the turn of the 20th century, teamed up with his cousin to begin building houses in the Cranston area after World War I. We joined RIBA in 1978, and Bill and I were told that we were the two youngest members ever admitted to the association. Bill was 19 and I was 21.

I have seen the hard work and dedication of the RIBA leaders who have come before us, people who put in the time and energy to build RIBA from an organization of less than 100 members in 1946 to some 1,200 member companies today. They gave us a strong voice and a strong financial foundation.

We've had a tremendous past, but what about the future?

As a student at Providence College, I was on the basketball team under legendary coaches Dave Gavitt and Joe Mullaney, and there I learned several lessons that went far beyond basketball. Every time we learned a new play, they'd teach us another. Every time we learned a new defense, they taught us another variation.

Gavitt would say to us: "If you stay the same, you fall behind. The opponent will figure you out and beat you."

We must change. We have done a multitude of things exceptionally well. But in too many instances, in too many areas, our opponents have figured us out and have beaten us.

I've spent the last six months or more listening to our members. Some of you have sought me out to tell me horror stories of what your business is going through right now...in dealing with legislation and overregulation, in dealing with unions, in trying to get permits. I've even spoken to a few of our members who are planning to move out of R.I., to throw in the towel.

I can understand the disappointment and frustration because I've felt these myself. But let me tell you something: Standing on the sidelines and complaining is not going to change a thing!

As many of you know, I've chaired RIBA's education and workforce development committee for years. This committee is designed to support career and technical education throughout the R.I. school system and to provide future qualified workers for our industry.

Our committee reacted to problems. Years ago, when we heard that Pawtucket was thinking of closing its programs, we got a team together from RIBA, including member Jack Bentz and my right arm, development coordinator Joanne DiGregorio, and people from other trade associations, and we met with school officials. They promised to do this and that, to get the kids out swinging hammers with two years. Then, one month later, they shut down the program.

I was absolutely disgusted, but Jack pointed out something important: They didn't throw us out. We

were in the room, and some people listened to us. That's the key: RIBA has to be "in the room" and get the message across to people who can do something about the problems we face.

So that's what our committee did statewide. We put together a team that included trades, teachers, mayors, superintendents of schools, and many others. We came up with a message that concentrated on the needs of the construction industry and jobs for the kids, and we went to war.

The net result of the six and a half years of effort since then? Several local programs have been saved, and Providence now has a \$90 million Career and Training Academy that teaches every trade and is the envy of every school district on the East Coast. These are students whose training and future careers R.I. cannot do without.

That taught me a hard lesson. First, we formed a team involving people from multiple venues, not just RIBA. Second, we developed a clear message. And finally, we became proactive instead of reactive.

The game changed. We changed. We took the battle to them. We must do the same thing on other issues, and it will take time and teamwork. Everybody has to be in the game.

For one thing, that means a membership drive for those R.I. contractors and subcontractors (almost 15,000) that don't yet belong to RIBA.

That also means better serving our current members. It means working harder for things like health-insurance reform, and land-use and permitting reform in R.I.

We need to get the continuing-education program going for contractors through the Contractors' registration and licensing board. Our Builders Helping Heroes charity needs to continue and grow.

We must deal with all these issues as a team and with a game plan.

We all have to get involved. Think what will happen if we don't!

Robert Baldwin is president of R.B. Homes, Inc., Lincoln and is president of R.I. Builders Assn.

New England Real Estate Journal - 17 Accord Park Drive #207, Norwell MA 02061 - (781) 878-4540