



CELEBRATING
55 YEARS

nerej

2010: It was the best of times, it was the worst of times...

January 13, 2011 - Rhode Island

It was a year that brought to mind the above quote from Charles Dickens because it clarified the business climate, and us and our businesses along with it. The stubborn economic trials forced us to find the best and the worst in ourselves as business people. Some were strengthened by slimming down, getting better educated and making the best of their skills, especially in marketing. Others couldn't clear the hurdles and were eliminated.

The year began with some welcome help from the General Assembly, which in its 2009 session had passed a bill extending the life of any approval, permit, variance or license by "tolling" the expiration periods of approved projects to June 30, 2011.

Early in the year, contractors and their employees began turning out at Rhode Island Builders Association headquarters to take the 8 Hour Lead-Safe Remodeler/Renovator Course. This was step number one in fulfilling the licensing requirements for a maze of new rules based on the Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA's) new Lead Renovation, Repair and Painting (RRP) rule. The rule requires that any contractor working in a pre-1978 building must employ complex new lead-hazard procedures in even the simplest of remodeling jobs.

While Rhode Island administered its own federally approved RRP program, EPA was backtracking on implementation and enforcement by mid-year. That was largely because of confusion over the rules as well as concerns by the National Association of Home Builders that too few contractors had time to get licensed before the RRP rule took full effect.

By the end of the year, Rhode Island had licensed over 2,000 contractors, and RIBA members seemed to be in synch with the new procedures.

Sprinklers

RIBA considered it a call to action when changes to the 2009 International Residential Code (IRC) included a requirement for residential fire sprinkler systems in new construction.

Over 40 members turned out for the state Building Code Standards Committee (BCSC) meeting at the Dept. of Administration in Providence on March 4th to testify against including the fire sprinkler rule in Rhode Island's code. Heeding arguments that residential fire sprinklers are not cost effective, especially compared with an interconnected smoke-alarm system, the BCSC voted down the requirement.

A regulatory issue that wouldn't go away in 2010, and hasn't yet, is the matter of increased jobsite ratios (from 1:1 to 5:1) of journeymen to apprentices in some unlicensed trades, proposed by the State Apprenticeship Council (SAC). RIBA, the Rhode Island Chapter of the Associated Builders and Contractors (ABC) and other trade groups contend that the proposed ratios would make it impossible for many small contractors to compete because they seldom have that many journeymen.

Despite defeats of the proposed ratios in Superior Court in 2007 (after a lawsuit filed by RIBA and

ABC) and by a gubernatorial veto in 2009, SAC seemed unwilling to take "no" for an answer, and set about in 2010 to promulgate the ratios as part of their own rules.

Even though RIBA members teamed up with ABC and other allies to testify against the proposed ratios at a September 8th hearing, SAC adopted the rules.

Spring floods

Record-breaking floods afflicted many parts of the state in March and April, but many RIBA members found some welcome extra work during a recovery that took all summer. The association itself reached out to both members and the public, providing contact information to bring together contractors, relief agencies and homeowners. RIBA took special steps to educate homeowners about hiring legitimate contractors.

Parts of Rhode Island were flooded not only with water but with out-of-state contractors looking for recovery work. Most of these contractors seemed to be legitimate, duly registering with the Rhode Island Contractors' Registration and Licensing Board (CRLB) before soliciting work. Some unscrupulous contractors, however, operated illegally, taking advantage of gullible homeowners affected by the disaster.

The R.I. housing scene

By the time 2010 was well under way, home sales in Rhode Island were reported on the rise. April sales statistics released by the Rhode Island Association of Realtors showed sales of existing single-family homes up 26 percent, from 529 sales in April 2009 to 668 sales in April 2010.

By July, progress was being reported on two other fronts of great concern to members: fees and permitting times. Attorney Michael A. Kelly, whose office is spearheading a campaign on RIBA's behalf for more realistic fees and faster permitting, reported progress on the litigation, notably through the discovery process. Since the fees these towns charged far exceeded the operating costs they were supposed, by law, to cover, RIBA instituted a class action suit against three communities, Kelly reported to the Board of directors in July.

"Green" remained king in Rhode Island in 2010, with increasing numbers of RIBA members earning their Certified Green Professional (CGP) designations from the National Association of Home Builders.

One member in particular, David Caldwell Jr. of Caldwell & Johnson Inc., captured attention not only statewide but nationally as well. Caldwell's development of three green homes in North Kingstown included the first house of its kind in New England to achieve green certification under all major national green standards: the National Association of Home Builders National Green Building Standard, Energy Star, the USGBC's LEED for Homes, and the U.S. Dept. of Energy's Builders Challenge Program.

On June 30th, Caldwell testified in Washington before the Senate Banking, Housing and Urban Affairs Subcommittee on Housing, Transportation and Community Development at the request of Sen. Robert Menendez (D-N.J.). Testimony about his own experience with green building was intended to support the proposed Energy Efficiency in Housing Act of 2009.

On November 10th, Sen. Sheldon Whitehouse (D-R.I.), a co-sponsor of the bill, toured the North Kingstown homes with Caldwell and members of the media.

RIBA happenings

After two years as president, Michael Artesani of W. Artesani & Sons Inc. stepped down to make way for a new administration headed by Robert Baldwin of R.B. Homes Inc., the association's 34th president. Installation took place at the RIBA Annual Meeting at the Alpine Country Club, Cranston,

on October 5th.

In his inaugural remarks, Baldwin vowed to keep RIBA "an extremely solid and strong organization," to fight for legislative and regulatory fairness for the shelter industry, and to increase membership. Member services did improve on many levels during 2010. For the first time, RIBA began accepting credit cards for many services, including event fees, membership dues and advertising in The Rhode Island Builder Report. As the year ended, RIBA staff members were mastering new BuilderFusion association management software, which promised a streamlined online experience for members. Once functional in early 2011, BuilderFusion will allow members to register for events, update their information, pay dues and registration fees, sponsor events, and communicate effortlessly with RIBA.

To reflect a change at the national level, RIBA's Women's Council changed its name to RIBA's Professional Women in Building (PWB). After fundraising activities in September and October, PWB raised over \$2,800 for breast cancer research.

Through the RIBA Institute, the program that coordinates all classes and seminars, education remained crucial in the association's 2010 agenda as regulatory and economic challenges continued. The frequently-offered 8 Hour Lead-Safe Remodeler/Renovator Course, required for RRP compliance, often was filled to capacity. The RIBA Remodelers Committee continued to organize informational, end-of-the-month seminars through much of the year. OSHA 10 Hour Certification classes, workshops on understanding the RRP lead rules, Professional Remodeler Experience Profile (PREP) assessments, green building and remodeling workshops, safety classes, and sessions on business management and taxes all were headliners among 2010's educational opportunities.

RIBA's committees continued their specialized work. This included the Legislative Committee and its monitoring of 125 measures at the State House that affected the industry, and continued support for the state's student construction programs by the Education and Workforce Development Committee. The Workers' Compensation Committee continued to expand members' savings potential through its endorsed program with The Renaissance Group.

The signature social and networking events of RIBA's year drew hundreds of participants in 2010. Always the highlight of the social calendar, the 60th Annual Outing and Clambake took place August 13th at the place where the event began in 1950: Francis Farm, Rehoboth, Mass.

RIBA golfers turned out at Crystal Lake Golf Club, Harrisville, on a cloudy September 17th for the Annual Golf Classic, followed by dinner, awards and door prizes.

RIBA's popular Networking Nights returned in 2010, with well attended events sponsored by Frank Webb's Bath Center in Warwick on September 15th, and by Anchor Insulation & Co., Inc., Pawtucket, on November 16th.

Home Show

RIBA's 61st annual Home Show attracted some 300 exhibitors and thousands of enthusiastic visitors from all over southeastern New England from March 11th through the 14th. A more open layout and many special features drew positive responses from exhibitors and visitors alike.

For information on RIBA membership, educational activities or social events, call (401) 438-7400.

Paul Eno is the owner and editor-in-chief of New River Press, Woonsocket and is the editor of the monthly RIBA newsletter, The Rhode Island Builder Report.

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