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July was a hectic month, but we have many good things to report - by Robert Baldwin

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First of all, I thank all members, staff and lobbyists of the Rhode Island Builders Association, especially Joseph Walsh and Gayle Wolf, and certainly our tireless outgoing executive director, Roger Warren, for their hard work in making this one of the most successful legislative sessions we've had in decades.

Thanks to those who helped get our message across to state lawmakers, several measures of great benefit to our industry - an industry so crucial to the economy of our state - were passed. These include extension of the "tolling" bill to stop the clock on the expiration of permits and approvals, a great boon to projects that might have been delayed because of the slow economy.

The "permitting" bill passed, establishing a 45-day deadline for official action on permits for residential or light commercial jobs. If a city or town does not act within that time limit, it forfeits half the permit fee.

Also passed was an important clarification of the state's zoning enabling act that safeguards property rights for developers when there is a conflict between a municipality's zoning ordinance and its comprehensive plan.

A new man at the helm

Another sea change has taken place at RIBA in the form of a new executive director. John Marcantonio took the helm on July 11 as his stalwart predecessor of nearly 15 years, Roger Warren, retired. He is a uniquely capable, energetic and clear-thinking man who will do honor to our association.

Meanwhile, we thank Roger for his many productive years of steady, effective leadership and administration, and on behalf of all of us, may he have a happy retirement!

A vindication

RIBA and our education and workforce development committee have worked for many years to support career and technical educational programs in Rhode Island schools. Working closely with the local chapter of the Associated Builders and Contractors of America and other construction trade organizations, we helped establish a successful statewide curriculum for our career and tech programs. This employs the nationwide National Center for Construction Education and Research (NCCER) curriculum.

The long-term goal is to provide a skilled pool of workers for our own industry, and to help students look forward to successful and rewarding construction-related careers in their own right.

We and our allied associations regularly sit down with school administrators and instructors to see what can be done to increase the share of scarce school funding for these programs. Members sometimes work with students one-on-one, and also participate in career fairs and other student programs to help attract good workers to our industry.

One of the preconceptions we've had to deal with all along is the "one size fits all" approach, with public education's main emphasis on "go to college." This is the axiom advanced by school administrators: All high school students must end up in college in order to have successful careers. For too long, all of public education has focused on this "go to college" goal. This has often served as a reason for them to cut back on career and technical programs.

RIBA and our allied organizations have fought that idea, while working with the Community College of Rhode Island and the New England Institute of Technology to develop more degree programs in construction-related fields as college options.

Still, we have had to stress again and again to skeptical administrators that college is not necessarily the right fit for every student, and that hands-on technical education can be the answer for "the neglected half" who do not do well in college preparatory courses or who have no interest in college.

Now we have an unlikely ally in that opinion, Harvard University.

Harvard's Graduate School of Education recently released a two-year, 44-page study, *Pathways to Prosperity: Meeting the Challenge of Preparing Young Americans for the 21st Century*, that states in no uncertain terms that one size does not fit all. The study's central message is what RIBA has been telling our state and local education officials all along: Career and technical education is a legitimate path to future success, whether it involves conventional college work or not. What the study does call for is high school or post-high school work that leads to certified credentials in one or another field or trade. This does not have to be a standard college curriculum.

Pathways to Prosperity goes much further than that, however. It essentially declares that America's educational system has been an overall failure in preparing youth for the jobs that are available. Shockingly, only 21 percent of students graduate from a four-year college program or a two-year program within six years. This clearly indicates that "square peg" students who don't fit into "round holes" are being neglected and set up for failure, and that radical changes are needed.

Along with RIBA member John Bentz of The Property Advisory Group Inc., who works tirelessly for the cause of better career and tech education in our state, I attended an unveiling of *Pathways to Progress* at the Community College of Rhode Island, Warwick, on June 13.

As far as I could see, every "mover and shaker" in the state's educational system was present. There were educational officials from other parts of New England, and even an assistant secretary from the U.S. Dept. of Education.

At the presentation, we heard many facts and statistics that will add arrows to our quiver when we stress the importance of career and technical education to Rhode Island's educational leaders. One thing that John Bentz and I learned was that these alternative pathways to success really can be built and used to the benefit of the students who need them.

The career and technical education system in Massachusetts is a shining example of this. I only hope that Rhode Island school officials were listening on June 13th.

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