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55 YEARS

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President's message: Looking back at the last couple of years as I finish my tenure

October 11, 2012 - Rhode Island

As I finish my tenure as your president of the Rhode Island Builders Association and look back at the last couple of years, a few thoughts come to mind. First, it has been a genuine honor and privilege to serve as president of this great and storied trade association. I thank all of you members, my fellow officers, members of the executive committee, members of the board of directors, committee chairs and committee members, and certainly our dedicated staff, headed by our new, energetic and determined executive director, John Marcantonio.

Secondly, as the 2012 political campaigns approach their climax on election day, politicians are asking, "Are you better off than you were four years ago?" Here we have a stark contrast between our association and the state of the construction industry and the economy in Rhode Island.

Regarding RIBA: As a trade association, the unhesitating answer is a resounding "YES"! We have joined together as a team, brought forth new ideas, become "proactive" instead of "reactive," and moved forward on multiple fronts, in multiple areas, all simultaneously. RIBA is emerging from these difficult times as a stronger, more united and more influential organization.

Our annually updated business plan, backed up with sound budgeting overseen by the new Finance Committee, is in place and gives an annual blueprint for our organization. Our revamped Home Show has "The House Back!" and looks for major growth in 2013 and beyond. Education programs have been developed and are ready to be rolled out to serve the entire construction industry in Rhode Island.

Insurance and healthcare programs are moving forward and look for big growth in 2013. The new membership committee has worked tirelessly to create "value back rewards" programs and the RIBAlist.com Internet outreach to help members save money and find more work. John Marcantonio is even visiting jobsites to recruit new members.

Our re-energized legislative committee has diligently and proactively carried our message to all state and local officials and regulators in all corners of Rhode Island. Spearheaded by John, we're at the State House making our positions known to our legislators.

We have developed close relationships with the Dept. of Environmental Management (DEM) and the Coastal Resources Management Council (CRMC) and look forward to implementing ways to combine economic growth with sensible regulations. We are in the offices of local mayors, administrators and planners to educate and stress how critical housing and construction are to the state and local economies. They know that RIBA is serious!

Our re-invigorated Build Pac Committee has generated nationally admired fundraising events that have not gone unnoticed by our locally elected federal officials. Our Builders Helping Heroes charity just started a new project to help a seriously wounded soldier (stay tuned for more information). "Green" building remains a focus for our association, with that committee continuing to get the

message out.

In short, a heartfelt "THANK YOU!" for great teamwork and a job well done! The "Aircraft Carrier RIBA" is headed in a proactive direction, and stands ready to attack for and defend the housing and construction industry in Rhode Island!

Unfortunately, our success at RIBA is in stark contrast to the dismal overall state of our industry and the economy in Rhode Island. Even with a slight uptick in activity this year, we remain at historic lows in terms of housing units and activity. The permitting process, despite a slow economy, is best described as Byzantine and torturous. Anti-growth sentiment pervades everything across the state. Tax policy is burdensome and often punishes business. State and local regulations continue to drive up the cost of housing here, compared with elsewhere in the U.S.

Case in point: The necessity of a \$25 million state Housing Bond Issue for workforce housing. Think about that for a minute. Anti-growth sentiment resulting in onerous, expensive state and local regulations has created a situation where private builders cannot build workforce-priced housing at affordable market rates, thereby requiring taxpayer assisted, subsidized/guaranteed bonds to build those units.

How about this? Lower or get rid of those expensive regulations, lower the cost, and watch us build those units without any taxpayer involvement!

The bottom line regarding our industry and the Rhode Island economy: NO, we are not better off!

As a result, we all still have a lot of work to do. The survival of our industry is at stake. All economists testify that housing is one of four economic engines that multiply jobs and activity throughout the economy. That message must be driven home to all officials statewide. We need permit reform. We need better tax policy. We need a statewide, pro-business attitude and climate that does not punish success and job creators. If the housing and construction industries need to lead that charge, then so be it! Let's lead that charge!

I urge all of you to do what RIBA is doing: Reach for first place, and don't settle for anything less! Never play for second place. The success (and survival) of our industry and our state require nothing less. Get involved! Join RIBA! Join the team!

Success is all the result of teamwork and talent, and our future is brighter because of it. Talented people working as a team will, and must, keep RIBA moving forward in a proactive way. This can also be done with Rhode Island as a state if we all get involved.

Once again, I thank all of you, and I wish our new president and administration all God's blessings and the very best!

Robert Baldwin is president of R.B. Homes, Inc., Lincoln and is president of RIBA.

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