

Urban Forum: APWA resources for your big city

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Many of our steadfast APWA members are familiar with or have been a part of the Urban Forum. For those new members and others not familiar with the Forum, the Urban Forum is an APWA resource available to public works officials from cities and other public agencies serving the nation's largest cities. The Forum offers two meetings per year, one stand-alone meeting in the spring and another held in conjunction with the APWA Congress.

Over the past two years, APWA has reinvigorated the group to meet the unique needs of our largest agency members and to attract new large cities to get involved with the public works agenda at the local, state and federal levels. As all public works officials know, the lack of funding and resources available to fund the adequate construction, maintenance, and refurbishment of our local public works infrastructure is sorely lacking. To that end, APWA has an ambitious public policy agenda to highlight the needs of our larger cities and work with officials at all levels of government to assure adequate funding for the infrastructure needs of all communities. And the voice of our big-city members with their constituents and their legislators is a critical component of that agenda.

Tom Wendorf, Director of Public Works for San Antonio and former Chair of the Urban Forum, believes that the Urban Forum is a critical asset to his city because it helps APWA members and others to learn and share better ways to raise the financial resources to meet each community's needs. "The sharing sessions are often the most beneficial aspect of the Urban Forum meetings," Wendorf says. "The Urban Forum provides an unprecedented opportunity for public works officials to share their unique situations and offer advice and comment to one another."

Urban Forum 2006

This year, APWA will host the Urban Forum in Washington, D.C. with top lawmakers in the country to address emergency management, water and wastewater issues, transportation, ethics, and U.S. Army Corp of Engineers projects among many other timely issues. Congressional members and their staff will join our public works officials for a reception on Capitol Hill to kick off the two-day meeting. We are happy to see significant outreach from federal officials who are looking to the Urban Forum to provide feedback on their programs and plans and who would like to work more closely with APWA in the future.

A little history

At the APWA Congress in Dallas in 1995, the APWA Urban Forum was launched to provide public works directors from cities with populations in excess of 250,000 with an opportunity to network with one another, exchange information, improve their own operations, and work together to effect public works policy at the federal level. At the Congress, the Urban Forum held a series of meetings involving public works directors and executives from 43 urban communities. "These early meetings were very productive and beneficial to those like me in attendance," says John German, then-Director of Public Works in San Antonio. "We learned that we all had similar problems, but that there were many different ways to address and resolve those problems and we learned by sharing our own approaches." German is now the Board of Directors representative to the Urban Forum.

The mission for the Forum was to raise the national consciousness about public works, develop learning experiences and opportunities for public works executives from large urban jurisdictions, and establish organizational profiles of large public works agencies to help Forum members identify options that might apply to their own operations. Forum participants wanted to:

- Increase the quality of performance for public works services in large communities,
- Influence public policies and perceptions about developing preserved and financing infrastructure assets,
- Enhance the public profile and understanding of public works, and
- Increase the professionalism of public works providers.

The Forum was chaired by George Balog, former Director of Public Works for the City of Baltimore, Maryland, and the inaugural executive committee consisted of: John Okamoto, Seattle, WA; Harry Stone, Los Angeles County, CA; Clyde Dowell, Detroit, MI; Marty Manning, Clark County, NV; Dave Rudberg, Vancouver, BC; and Bill Verkest, Arlington, TX. The first meeting of the Forum was held in Kansas City, hosted by then-Public Works Director Ed Wolf. Thirty-five members attended the meeting with an address by the Honorable Emanuel Cleaver, Mayor of Kansas City, and a tour of the Kansas City Public Works Department and projects.

Looking to the future

The landscape has changed since the initiation of the Urban Forum back in 1995, but the mission of the group has not. "The Urban Forum brings balance to this great organization," says Bill Verkest, APWA President-Elect and founding member of the Forum. "Balance in that the first Strategic Planning exercise conducted in the 1990s recognized that we needed more focus on the bigger city issues and that those issues will eventually migrate down to the smaller and more rural communities. Balance in that we not only serve our average size constituencies, but through our advocacy and education efforts we serve the entire public works community. The Urban Forum accomplishes that vision."

APWA looks forward to working with Urban Forum members to achieve their public policy goals of more funding for public infrastructure projects, parsing the details and requirements of our new homeland security responsibilities, and representing APWA Urban Forum members' needs at the federal level. We urge you to join, get active, and help carry the public works flag for our big cities.

For more information or to become active in the Urban Forum, please visit the APWA members only Urban Forum community on InfoNOW or contact Julia Anastasio in APWA's Washington Office at janastasio@apwa.net or (202) 218-6750.