

AMERICAN PUBLIC WORKS ASSOCIATION

APWA



Texas Chapter

IN THE NEWS

APWA's Texas Chapter: In a Word? Family

They say, “everything is bigger in Texas,” and this was certainly true—in North Carolina!—when the APWA Texas Chapter took the PWX stage this past August to receive its 25th Presidential Award for Chapter Excellence, or PACE.

Just under 100 Texas Chapter members enthusiastically filled the Charlotte Convention Center’s main ballroom to pose for a celebratory picture with APWA CEO Scott Grayson and then APWA President Stan Brown.

Which got many onlookers wondering, “How do they get so much participation?”

There are many reasons why the Texas Chapter continues to thrive. Those reasons can all be umbrellaed under the one word suggested by this article’s headline: family.

“Everybody feels comfortable around each other because it’s more of a family environment,” said Chapter President Jay VonAhsen, a senior project manager at Kimley-Horn and Associates.

“I see these folks more like friends than coworkers, and I think it’s that family feel that’s allowed us to grow,” the chapter’s vice-president, Luis Maltos, explained during an interview with the APWA Reporter.

Soon after Chapter Administrator Dorothy Bergesen joined the Texas Chapter in 2008, she said she met “a lot of different people” through social events and knew soon afterwards she was home.

“I was like, ‘Man, this is my group. These are my people,’” Bergesen, a business development coordinator at Freese and Nichols, said. “They welcomed me with opened arms and I just said, you know, this is the organization I would love to get more involved in.”

The chapter’s directors agree; however, you can’t just say you’re going to be a family and, voilà, it happens.

No, each person the Reporter interviewed for this “Public Works Awareness” article pointed to someone else in the chapter’s

history for getting it to where family is a feeling and actions are measurable.

VonAhsen credits former chapter president Ronnie Bates (now current Texas Chapter North Central Branch treasurer) and John German (a former Top 10 Public Works Leader of the Year) with the feeling of togetherness. Bergesen and Maltos point to Tom Wendorf, who was the head of San Antonio’s Public Works Department and president of the chapter when Bergesen became an APWA member in 2006.

The Texas chapter, which Wendorf says was called TPWA during his time at the helm, had about 1,000 members in the mid-2000s. And he remembers how he and others coalesced the good vibe that today represents a very active chapter and membership north of 2,000.

“I think you start with what are the needs of the members. How does the association get a handle on that for the members? And then you find out you have a lot of things in common,” Wendorf said. “We actually focused on frontline employees—not just management—supervisors and foremen and that kind of thing, and actual equipment operators.”

Knowing what they now know, the Texas Chapter runs active advocacy campaigns at the state level. VonAhsen said his chapter’s public policy statements and strate-

gic plan mirror APWA’s, and their local conferences resemble PWX. Local conferences are big deals in Texas, as are social events.

But even the “business-like” gatherings remain social.

“That family feel has allowed us to grow here locally in San Antonio. Our local brand has grown by leaps and bounds the last few years,” said Maltos, an assistant city engineer for the City of San Antonio’s Transportation & Capitol Improvement Office.

When the Texas Chapter meets to plan for its annual conference, they don’t just meet. They make it a themed adventure. Everyone is engaged. In 2021, the conference theme was “Public Works in Paradise” and in 2022 it was “Public Works Play-by-Play.”

APWA-Texas’ social events, as you may have already guessed, are also celebratory. Just look at the participation at the golf tournament they had while meeting in 2021 for annual conference planning.

2023 promises to be just as active for the chapter. Next month, the chapter will hold a public workshop for operators and field staff, Feb. 6-8, at the Sheraton Austin Georgetown Hotel and Conference Center in Georgetown, TX.

“We really try to advocate to the cities across Texas and their public works de-

partments to get their field staff there because that’s really what the educational sessions are about,” VonAhsen said.

A rodeo contest will also be held during the February public workshop (one was held last month, too), and awards will also be announced for top projects, leaders, equipment operator of the year and field excellence.

If you’re an APWA chapter member in another part of the world and you want to be like the Texas Chapter?

Don’t stress and have great membership chairs who communicate with members, current and prospective.

“Even though you may have a director of public works in a major city, I think them showing up in slacks and a shirt or blue jeans makes them more approachable to some of the field staff and other supervisors,” VonAhsen said. “That approachability I think is huge, especially at the branch level.”

Wendorf, who is working to tell the story of past Texas Chapter members to share the “big things” they did when they were at the helm, said chapters must know what their members want.

“You know, what keeps them up at night?” Wendorf said.

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