

## Trade groups gaining membership in tough times

By **MONICA UNHOLD**, The Daily Transcript  
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Members of the construction industry are increasingly turning to trade organizations for guidance and camaraderie in a down economy.

Most construction trade groups in the region reported their membership numbers are steadily increasing, or remaining constant despite the hardships facing their industry.

Associated General Contractors of America San Diego Chapter has seen a steady stream of new members, with between 10 and 12 companies or individuals joining each month over the past five months, said Brad Barnum, vice president of government relations for AGC San Diego.

AGC is seeing companies with experience in the residential market moving into the public works sector where contracts are still being issued.

The group is able to assist such contractors in working under the requirements on public jobs, offering workshops on prevailing wage and payroll requirements on federally funded projects, Barnum said. "I think what we're providing is very valuable, in terms of training, education and lobbying," Barnum said. "More members are seeing the benefits of joining organizations."

AGC also offers its members an annual meeting with construction officials in various government agencies to discuss upcoming projects, including the city of San Diego, the Port of San Diego, the California Department of Transportation and the U.S. Navy.

While the group's membership numbers are holding steady, Barnum is concerned about losing members working in the hard hit commercial market.

"It'd be fair to say we're cautiously optimistic about next year," Barnum said.

Other groups, such as the American Institute of Architects San Diego Chapter are offering concessions to entice new members, such as structuring dues in monthly payments rather than a single lump sum. The payment plan makes membership more palatable for architects who have seen a reduced workload due to the recession, said Elizabeth O'Malley, executive director of AIA San Diego.

The organization was expecting to see a 15 percent reduction in membership but only experienced a 7 percent reduction.

AIA's board of directors budgeted accordingly and the group has come up 8 percent ahead of budget because of stable membership numbers, O'Malley said.

Dues aside, O'Malley believes architects are joining up to keep themselves occupied.

"If they aren't staying at their desks late at night they're coming to hang out with their peers," O'Malley said. "They want to take each other's pulses and see how others are coping."

The AIA's most recent networking event drew 75 members; such events typically draw no more than 45, O'Malley said.

"I think in tough times people pull together," O'Malley said, likening the present to the 1850s, when the AIA was founded amid similar economic conditions.

Associated Builders and Contractors, San Diego chapter has also seen a decline in membership, but considers its numbers good given economic conditions, said George Hawkins, president and chief executive officer of ABC San Diego.

The group has made no concessions in terms of dues, but is seeing new members join to take advantage of training and health insurance opportunities.

"Most are joining for the same reasons as past years," Hawkins said.

The Engineering & General Contractors Association (EGCA) San Diego chapter is also experiencing steady membership numbers, said Debbie Day, EGCA executive director.

The group is helping its members cope with economic conditions and regulatory uncertainty by offering educational courses and networking events, Day said. Most notably, the group has planned a course that will help contractors comply with new regulations on diesel-powered construction equipment recently adopted by the California Air Resources Board.

It is understandable that construction industry trade groups are experiencing steady membership numbers in tough times, Day said.

“A lot of times the associations are the ones that can help you get through it,” Day said.