

Fostering a Stronger Industry Voice at the State & Local Level

The largest privately held tower company takes the lead in creating platforms to strengthen the local voice of the wireless industry.

by Paul Estes

Pundits who often debate the finer points of the U.S. wireless industry's future agree on at least one prediction: State and local developments increasingly influence company fortunes on regional and national scales as the industry consolidates.

For supporting evidence, consider California's regulatory upheaval. Add a series of comparably complex issues (some promising, others not) that have cropped up since 2003 in Minnesota, South Dakota, Colorado, Tennessee and elsewhere. The end-game is clear: The most ominous threats—and the greenest fields of opportunity—are

communications was rapidly growing its tower portfolio with acquisitions, we surveyed our frontline customers. We asked how we (as one tower company among others) might help them with their future needs and concerns. Responses revealed topics ranging from anticipating market trends to evaluating new technologies.

They also—frequently—mentioned local zoning struggles.

One characterized zoning as his “number one issue.” But he didn't blame zoning officials themselves. In fact, just the opposite: He blamed the wireless industry. He lamented that the

tion or on the exploding demand for the services we provide. [Editor's note: See related story on page 14.]

For all of those reasons—from our customer's direct input to an expanding array of state legislative and regulatory battles—we decided to identify ways in which AAT might help the industry strengthen its collective “local voice.”

We recognized early on that, as a single company, our effect would be limited. We knew our actions would need to be coordinated with and supported by others, including national trade associations, carriers, tower companies, service providers and consultants.



From the mountains to the prairies: Local leaders across the nation are developing grassroots state wireless associations to elevate the local dialogue and perceptions of wireless infrastructure. They are being supported in these efforts by private companies, such as AAT Communications, and national trade groups, such as PCIA.

often found *outside* of Washington, in state capitols, county seats and other local jurisdictions.

In late 2003, when AAT Commu-

wireless industry had spent *little to no meaningful time* with state and local officials to educate them on the changes in our industry, on its evolu-

In mid-2004, after we acquired tower assets from Signal One, Pat Tant (who joined us as our vice president of national sales and marketing) suggested

supporting the formation of new state wireless associations, using (as a model) the successful experience Pat and others had with such associations in Tennessee, Alabama and Georgia.

The concept made sense. State associations involve players from all sectors of the industry and are positioned to focus on local issues in a way that national associations simply cannot.

Shortly thereafter, we began pulling together materials and developing a “how to” guide. The ultimate goal was to make these materials available—free of charge, on a stand-alone Web site—to anyone interested in forming a state wireless association. We also looked for a partner to help us launch the resource.

By early 2005, as we were renewing our PCIA membership, we expressed the concept to several PCIA leaders. They saw the value and offered to design and host the Web site where the new materials would be housed.

In May 2005, the program was launched as SWAP—the State Wireless Association Program (www.swapprogram.net).

Response has been overwhelming. Even before the program was launched, industry leaders in Florida, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina and South Carolina tapped the experience of Pat and other SWAP contributors. Since the launch, industry representatives in New York, California, Pennsylvania and elsewhere have voiced interest in the program’s resources, further validating the need for a coordinated effort.

To sustain that momentum, several of AAT’s managers now use SWAP resources to help get associations up and running in various other states. Moreover, SWAP will be the subject of a panel discussion and a prominent educational display at PCIA’s annual trade show.

AAT will continue to support SWAP because it is the type of effort our customers asked us to support. The wireless industry (more so than most) is a “symbiotic” industry. As one sector rises, so rise the others. Accordingly, it’s in our best interests to help coordinate a common, unified voice on legislative

and regulatory issues. In that way, we can do a better job, collectively, of educating our stakeholders (including the end-users of wireless services) on the many benefits this industry has to offer, in every state where we operate.

Editor’s note: A session on “SWAP: The State Wireless Associa-

tion Program” will be offered as a Business and Finance Track session at 9 a.m., Wednesday, Sept. 14, during the PCIA Wireless Infrastructure Conference and Expo at the Westin Diplomat, Hollywood, FL. agl

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