

FrontLine

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President's Message

By Rick Warsinskey, NCSSMA President

SSA is a fast paced Agency. No one would deny this. The challenge always seems to be keeping up with the pace. The fast pace SSA sets tells you something about the dedication of our Agency and its employees. We are never satisfied with staying still and constantly want to improve things.

We can look back to what once was. Sometimes we long for the good old days of a slower pace. But really, who would return to the days of an ARS machine or microfiche? Who would want a pre-Pentium built computer to work with or e-mail running at one five hundredth of the current speed? Who would want to go back to the days of tally strips or taking claims on paper? Who would want to go back to the days of smoke filled offices or chairs that had no ergonomic features?

Progress has made the Agency better. Progress happens in this agency because we push to make the agency better. While we see many, many improvements, the need for improvements will never end. Your management association has been and continues to be in the center of looking for ways to continue to improve SSA.

There are several key areas where we need to continue to strive toward improvement. These include telephone service, quality, installation of new systems and programs, our suggestion system, space actions, office waiting times, our work measurement system and training especially for new employees, recently promoted employees and management. Your management association can make a difference by bringing these issues to the Agency's attention. We write papers highlighting the problems and make suggestions on how to improve the situation. We also work with different executives informally to address problems, concerns and possible improvements in our processes. As president, I am committed to offer realistic solutions when we see something that needs to be changed. I feel strongly that our association should couple any issue we raise with a realistic solution. Sometimes the solution may require a workgroup to analyze the issue in depth and then many years of development may be needed to bring the final product to fruition. SUMS is a good example of a long term solution to our work measurement problems.

One of our more perplexing challenges is having adequate staffing and management. Working to get adequate staffing in SSA and particularly field and TSCs will assuredly always be on our plate. The biggest key is our budget and this will be something we will be working on with even

more diligence in the next year. We are currently working on a plan to improve our grassroots efforts that are critical to our success in this area. We are also looking at how severe staffing shortages can be more timely addressed using existing resources within the Agency.

Management staffing is another important issue for us. There are two key ways to address this: increase management staffing and/or improve management's time management by removing non-managerial duties that take up our time. We just sent in 14 suggestions to improve the latter option of time management. Increasing management staffing is something that has been discussed extensively for the past decade since management in the field and TSCs was so severely cut.

This coming year we will be faced with a new Performance Management System (Three Tiered Appraisals). Whatever positives you can say about this system- one thing is clear-it will take much more time to administer than the current pass-fail system. We have a great deal at stake in seeing this new system not drag down management in time consuming activities that add little or no value to our office productivity, morale or development. The manner in which this is implemented is also very important. No one wants to return to the days of the numeric hysteria of the 80s or the appraisal creep that made appraisals meaningless.

It is important to remember that field and TSC management will also be under a new appraisal system. We do not want the new system to distort our processes or bust our morale; therefore, we will be involved in making constructive suggestions wherever needed.

In order for us to effectively voice your concerns and/or suggestions, it is imperative that you give us feedback. When we meet with Agency executives or write to them we want to ensure we are expressing your concerns. My personal opinion means little compared to the more collective voice of the members, so write or call us. Tell us your suggestions.

My final request is that you give us some feedback on our FrontLine articles. Please drop us a note to: frontline-Editor@ncssma.org. It would be great to hear from you!



Pictured is **Doug Schenck, DM, Rockford, IL & CSSMA Regional VP**

“I’ve Been Working On The Railroad” or “Reflections on the NCSSMA Meeting in San Diego from the Side of the Tracks”

By Doug Schenck, DM, Rockford, IL & CSSMA Regional VP

I was asked by incoming NCSSMA President, Rick Warsinskey, to write something on what our Deputy Commissioner for Operations (DCO) Linda McMahon had to say to us when she spoke at the NCSSMA Annual Meeting in beautiful San Diego, California, earlier this month. In coming up with an approach, I thought that it seemed altogether fitting to submit this little report by sticking – more or less – to a railroad theme. This is, in part, because outgoing (and universally beloved and respected) NCSSMA President – Ron Buffaloe – is a train/railroading aficionado. In fact, at the President’s Reception (held on 10/31 and designated to be a costumed affair in deference to Halloween), our esteemed colleague from North Carolina came dressed as a railroad man: red handkerchief, blue & white striped engineer’s hat and all. But another reason to wrap this little report around a railroading theme is because of our featured speaker on the third day of our meetings, our leader in Operations, Linda McMahon.

Ms. McMahon is well known to most of us by now but a few additional insights were gained during the NCSSMA meetings and social events held early in November, there by the Bay in San Diego. After considering these, see if you don’t agree with me that a railroad theme fits for her, as well.

First of all, our DCO is a dancer. Alan Alexander – CSSMA Treasurer and seated next to her at the banquet and just opposite San Francisco Regional Commissioner Pete Spencer – was the first to take Ms. M to the dance floor at the Banquet on Wednesday night. They made an attractive duo out there on the hardwoods. So, yes, Ms. McMahon can keep her “rhythm on the rails”, so to speak and there is, apparently, still some fire left in the old boiler for our Alan, too. But ‘what happens in San Diego stays in San Diego’ so enough of that. The food at the banquet, by the way, was worthy of “The Orient Express” so special kudos to the San Francisco Management Association for coordinating and planning this great event.

During polite conversation at the banquet table (which included not only Mr. Spencer, Ms. McMahon, and Mr. Alexander, but also held CSSMA Secretary Chris Marcoux and spouse Rocky and yours truly with spouse, Pat), someone said they thought they overheard our honored guest say that she had begun her day at something between 2 am and 3 am that morning. She traveled west and made the reception and banquet in San Diego much later this same day and was due to present the keynote

address that following morning. Never shy in conversation or at a loss for words, Mr. Alexander asked Ms. McMahon – a little rhetorically – whether her being unavoidably tired after such a long day would put her in a bad mood when she talked to us the following morning. Our intrepid DCO took this comment in stride and with good humor, showing that she can keep her chin up despite having to travel and work “all the live-long day”.

When she spoke to us at our reconvened meetings that morning following the banquet, Ms. McMahon adroitly and determinedly worked through a number of issues of a detailed and technical nature with the cadence and delivery one might see from one of those train track-laying crews. First she carefully laid out the issues in question just as one might firmly and carefully hold a spike in one’s hand and then she delivered the agencies (and her) assessments and the agencies (and her) subsequent decisions on each topic she covered, much like one might precisely hammer that rail spike into a railroad tie.

The ‘official’ minutes of the meeting will be posted and – for those interested in the all the details of her presentation – that is where you can go. What will be covered in the balance of this little report are just a few items of special note that she wanted to be sure we all clearly understood and some final impressions of our featured guest I thought worthy of sharing.

Ms McMahon began her talk us by delivering the most important message first and the one which she wanted to convey most clearly which was “Thanks”. Thanks to those assembled at that place and to all those we represented. For all that SSA folks achieve – and because of the value of these achievements to the American public – she says she feels truly blessed to be working for this best of all federal agencies at this time in history.

She then went right on to say that SSA was – yet once again – recognized as the superb public service organization it has always been during the recent Katrina/Wilma/Rita disasters. The selflessness and commitment of SSA folks was in clear evidence and was a shining example for all of government and the public we serve. She even alluded to the calls she received from other government agencies asking “How did SSA do it?!” This was truly a tribute to SSA’s capacity for service and the will to deliver that service where and when it was most needed.

Ms. McMahon covered a whole range of other topics and issues during her presentation. These topics included: upgrades, workloads and approaches to workloads, the new national agreement, staffing, budgets and awards (among many others). As she covered these items, she did so with a delivery as firm as that of a crew boss on a railroad track gang

and with the confidence of her decisions as unbendable as any spike used to hold down a rail. Her resolve, her convictions and her will are always abundantly present and clearly articulated and usually carry with them the force and inertia of the typical freight train, fully loaded.

Ms. McMahon's confidence and resolve – when in basic accord with NCSSMA's goals and objectives – is a most welcome and is unquestionably a formidable ally. When NCSSMA's goals and objectives are a bit divergent from our DCO's, however, these same traits become daunting challenges to be won over or with which to finally become reconciled. Some items we may not ever be in agreement on; most - thankfully and fittingly - we are.

Agree with her on every issue or not, Ms. McMahon has given us much of what we look for in an effective leader: a deep well of strength, firm and unwavering convictions and, unflagging tenacity. She has endeavored to be a champion for the field organization in SSA and – even if we still need to do a little persuading to help her see the wisdom of NCSSMA's stances on just a few key issues – we can certainly applaud her stalwart support for us in so many more areas and in so many other important ways.

Based on all she's said over the past 6 years or so, I'm sure Ms. McMahon would agree that we (i.e., all SSA employees) are the coal that fires the engine of SSA achievement while she proudly takes the role of engineer, guiding the train of success down the tracks of SSA's mission and destiny. (Enough metaphors for you there? I said it this would be a message with a railroad theme, didn't I?)

Let's hope – if the dynamic duo of Joanne Barnhart & Linda McMahon are not re-appointed to again head our agency when Ms. Barnhart's appointment expires in the not-too-distant future – that we are as well served by their successors as we have been by this team. And let's hope that they – like a good conductor and capable engineer – keep us on track as we continue to ride the rails for SSA.

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A First Time Visitor's Impressions of the NCSSMA Annual Meeting By Doug Schenck, CSSMA Regional VP

NCSSMA's Annual Meeting was held the first week in November and was - by all accounts - a successful and exceedingly well run affair. The San Francisco delegation and volunteers - under the guiding eye of Gary Twait and Karen Sims, et al - did a great job planning and hosting this annual assembly.

There will be other, more 'newsy' and fact-drenched reports of the resolutions passed, what was learned from the presenters and other such business-related news. This article is designed to give a slightly different, more subjective perspective on the goings on out there by the Bay. For this brief report, from a "first-timer attendee's/outside's" view, a few questions were posed to first time attendee and non-delegate Rocky Marcoux. We'll let Rocky tell you who exactly he works for and who he came with in his answers, just below. But just so readers are aware of what his involvement and connection was to these meetings, everyone should know that he flew out - at his own expense - to San Diego to represent the next host city for NCSSMA's Annual Meeting. That host city is one that's come to be known as 'A Real American City', is home to Harley Davidson and Miller Brewing Company, and many other nationally and internationally known companies and organizations and it is called Milwaukee.

Rocky's position with the City of Milwaukee - and his attachment to the Chicago delegation's Secretary, Chris Marcoux - made him the ideal candidate to present Milwaukee to the NCSSMA members on hand so that they would know what the Chicago Regional Association was planning for the October 2006 meeting. We (CSSMA Officers and the entire Chicago Association's Executive Committee) gave Rocky this duty with the expectation that he would present Milwaukee (and represent CSSMA) in a manner befitting the largest Regional Organization in NCSSMA. He did not disappoint anyone.

Rocky's presentation was professional and really seemed to 'sell' the assembled representatives on the benefits of Milwaukee as a site for the next big meeting. So we (CSSMA Members) really owe him a debt of thanks for that. And we all really intend to make good on the promise of a great meeting in America's heartland next year. Oh, and by way of explanation: Before settling with lovely wife Chris (a Bloomington, Illinois native) in Milwaukee as their chosen home town, Rocky hailed from New England. Thus the reason for the somewhat non-Milwaukee-like accent you hear when you speak with him and his allusion to the Red Sox in one of his answers below. But, now, let's hear what Rocky had to say, in his own words:

FL: What is your full name and what is official title and general duties of your usual 'day job'? To whom are you related in CSSMA and how did

you come to be included in the attendees at the NCSSMA meeting in San Diego?

RM: I'm Rocky Marcoux, Commissioner of City Development for the City of Milwaukee. I head up economic development activities for the City of Milwaukee including real estate, zoning, industrial, commercial and residential planning and development. My wife, Chris Marcoux, is the secretary of the Chicago Management Association. I accompanied her to the National Council meeting in San Diego and provided a presentation the delegates and attendees on what they can expect in Milwaukee and Chicago in anticipation of the National Council meeting which will be held in Milwaukee next year.

FL: From what you could observe, how was the NCSSMA meeting in San Diego different and how was it the same as compared to other meetings and conferences you attend when representing Milwaukee?

RM: Each organization is unique. I was impressed by the professionalism exhibited by the attendees at this meeting. You did have much better door prizes than I have seen in other meetings. It was similar in that I am always promoting the great offerings the city of Milwaukee boasts.

FL: Based upon your impressions of the SSA folks you met in San Diego, how are they different and how are they the same as those folks you deal with in your usual profession?

RM: Social Security folks seem very engaged in their work and well-versed in the challenges in their localities. I had in-depth conversations with participants on economic development in their localities and was very impressed with their knowledge of local development issues and trends.

FL: Based upon all you saw going on at the National Meetings, what is your impression of the level of energy, commitment and professionalism you observed in the attendees? Did you sense optimism, pessimism or realism in the folks you saw and talked with?

RM: People seemed interested in their jobs and in particular the demands/rewards of providing good customer service.

FL: What was your impression of the quality and value of the non-meeting activities that took place while you were attending the meetings (i.e., the side trips/day trips that had been arranged for delegates, alternates and significant others on hand for the meetings)?

RM: The host committee offered a wide variety of activities that appealed to diverse interests. They highlighted the positive attributes of San Diego.

FL: What was your impression of San Diego and southern California in general? Are there a few things that you would advise folks not to miss if they ever get out that way?

RM: San Diego is an impressive urban center. Balboa Park merits exploration and tells a significant story of San Diego's past. Coronado Island and San Diego's waterfront are must-see attractions.

FL: Did you see any notable differences in the nature of the delegations

from one part of the country as compared to other parts? (i.e., did the Dallas folks leave you with a different impression from the New England bunch when you saw them at the welcome reception and/or at the Banquet or side trips? Did Denver seem like or different from Chicago? And what about New York? Or did you not see enough to make an observation?)

RM: Unfortunately, not everyone is a Red Sox fan. It is difficult to characterize regional differences, except to note that the New York delegation was very unique.

FL: What special experiences and sites do you see Milwaukee as having in store for the attendees at next year's NCSSMA Meeting?

RM: People will be very impressed with the beauty, cleanliness and friendliness of our great city. Our cultural heritage as exhibited in our many museums and architecture, our lakefront and parks and hospitality.

FL: Based on what you saw in the folks attending the meetings, would you suggest SSA as a viable choice for someone seeking a job in the civil service wherein they might have an outlet for serving people? (Why or why not?)

RM: It's always encouraging to see career civil servants who continue to strive for excellence.

FL: Based on everything you saw in terms of the people working in Mgmt for SSA and representing their Mgmt counterparts from around the country and based on the concerns that were expressed during and after the meetings and based upon the goals and objectives as you heard them articulated at and after the meetings, do you feel the American public is well-served by the folks you saw in attendance at the meetings?

RM: Yes

FL: Did you get to see Arnold Schwarzenegger or any other high-ranking or famous Californian while out there for the meetings?

RM: I didn't get to see or talk to the "Govenator" (as - reportedly - some of our fellow CSSMA delegation did) but I did see the baby panda on the Panda cam at the world famous San Diego Zoo. And - as an aside - I was impressed to see a major city run without a mayor.

State of the Art Printers-Antiquated Phones

By Greg Heineman, DM, Norfolk NE Vice President, NCSSMA

I sit here in my office this morning, with a new Dell 1700 Local Printer installed at my desk. It is replacing a functional IBM Network 12 printer that I received in 1998. The new Dell Printer is better, but the old printer was still working. Similarly I will soon be receiving 3 Lexmark Optra T-644 printers to replace my Unisys 9724+ printers I received in 2001. It's time for the Unisys printers to be replaced, but they have only needed limited service during their 4 year working lifetime. The new printers will be the third group of Systems printers we received since 1998.

In 1991, the phone system in my district was replaced with an Executone phone system. The office moved in 1994, and the Executone system went with us. We were a pilot for the original Voice Mail System for field offices in 1995. At that time, my Executone vendor told me that the VMS system was being cobbled onto an obsolete platform. But we got by. It is now late 2005. We will be moving to new space in the summer of 2006, as our space needs have increased due to IWS-LAN, IVT technology, modular furniture, and other office enhancements. When I move, I will be taking the 1991 Executone Phone System with me.

My point is not necessarily to say that my plight is any better or worse other offices, but to point out that while the agency has paid attention to office automation needs as they relate to computers and printers, we have been dragging our feet in providing managers with phone systems that can help them deal with a significant part of their workload. Studies done by OQA in connection with the Field Office Service Observation program indicate that Field offices receive 63.6 million telephone calls a year, an average of about 4000 calls per month per office!

The phone systems in most SSA field offices have little to no programming capability which would allow managers to direct calls to other employees when absences occur. Most local phone systems have little management information (MI) available to deal with imbalance in phone traffic. Both of the primary phone systems currently in use in SSA field offices (Executone and Fujitsu) are out of production. Replacement parts are obtained by cannibalizing other phones. Service calls are generally answered, but often offices in rural areas are disadvantaged because the phone vendor is located hours away.

SSA is currently piloting two new phone systems, both designed to use Voice Over Internet Protocol (VOIP) technology. While there have been some early rough spots, it appears that the technology holds promise. The current agency plan is to roll out the new phone systems by the end of FY 2008. Whether our current phone systems can last that long is an

open question. The capabilities of the VOIP systems currently being tested appear to provide managers with many of the capabilities we have been missing in our current systems. SSA needs to expedite the roll out of these systems to field offices as soon as possible, sooner than 2008 if possible.

In addition to rolling out new phone systems, SSA needs to take a serious look at the entire issue of field office phone services. Most managers currently have to balance the demands of ever increasing walk-in traffic due to MMA and other programs with increasing call volumes on their local telephones. These choices, made at a time of staffing that is stable at best, cause managers to decide to sacrifice one level of service for another. This also comes at a time when the TSC system is running very near capacity as well.

The key reason FO's have high busy rates, much higher than the 800 number, is the limited number of incoming lines. To handle more lines, you have to assign staff to answer them. Because staffing is finite, putting additional resources on answering FO incoming calls means pulling them from taking interviews or clearing work. In SSA, what does balanced service mean? If we are going to live by that motto of balanced service, then something else needs to give. Perhaps we need to discuss this openly. Providing improved telephone service in field offices may mean taking some radical steps and lowering our workload production (as we did with redeterminations and CDR's in past years) to provide acceptable FO telephone service.

Looking at field office telephone service as an integral part of our service delivery processes is vital to meeting the customer service needs of our customers. That perspective is long overdue. We need to acknowledge that local telephone service needs to improve, and look at ways to make this improvement happen.

Phil Walton, FrontLine Editor

Four SeaGate, Suite 1000 Toledo, OH 43604

Phone: 419-259-7300 Fax: 419-259-2056

Email: frontline-Editor@ncssma.org