"Good!"

Larry Cooley is so quick and emphatic in his response to the question that no more needs to be said, it seems. So, for those interested in how the new president of AWCI (as of July 1) sees our industry, it's "good."

Figuring the readership would want more, and speaking from his car, which is where we tracked him down between meetings, he elaborates. He manages first to find parking in Manhattan so he can give us his undivided attention. The first point of note is that he's a busy man who still has time for people, a good sign for those he's representing.

"The labor shortage we've been experiencing has been easing up, but there is still a shortage of qualified mechanics. Material is in better supply than a couple of years ago, when there were a lot of shortages.

"If anything needs to be fixed, it is collections, which are still a problem when GCs don't pay fast enough. Timely payment of our bills is very important, and I would like to see AWCI working on a state-to-state basis to ensure "prompt-pay" legislation exists throughout the country; and where it is on the books already, to improve it. We

By Steven Ferry

Meet Larry Cooley, AWCI's 2001-2002 President

On the links, from left to right, are Pat Boyd, Larry Cooley, Arthur Godsell and Joe Oliveri.
also should educate the contractors who are members of our association on the tools available to them that can improve their collection activity.”

While slow payment is troublesome enough, it is not the pivotal issue that Cooley sees for the future welfare of the industry.

“The training of apprentices and retraining of journeymen into the skills that are necessary for today’s mechanics has to occur if we are to stop the erosion of the job force. It has to be improved, in other words, by both recruitment and training of manpower. We need to work on new areas to gather men into the trade. People that come to this country as new citizens may be an area we could pursue.”

Rather than falling into the temptation of new brooms sweeping clean, however, Cooley is committed to “following in the footsteps of those people who have gone before me by carrying on the programs they have initiated, while also introducing my own.”

**Hey, It’s OK to Join In**

He would like to see one new program, though, to “encourage some of the members that don’t play an active role in AWCI activities, for them to touch base and move a little closer. Our membership is very large and I would like to see more members being involved, rather than only a very narrow group participating.

“I don’t have any ideas at present on how to achieve this goal, but we have to sit down and put our heads together to develop some programs and try them. If they succeed, we’ll pursue them further, and if they don’t, we’ll put them aside.”

**AWCI on a Roll**

“AWCI has undergone a tremendous change in the last decade. A number of years ago, we were experiencing financial problems and the membership was fragmented. Under the leadership of Steven Etkin, our executive vice president, and with the help of a few key people in the organization, I am very happy that we have improved our overall outlook financially and organizationally.

“In addition, we have to improve our political activities. We all need to be more aware of how local and state politicians can help the industry, and then to make use of those associations.

“AWCI is here for everyone, regardless of the size of their company—from the fellow just starting out to folks out there doing large jobs. They are all equal in the eyes of this association. They should take this equality into consideration when they decide whether they want to become more involved. We want input from everyone, regardless of whether they are a drywall contractor in a small town someplace, or a large company in a large city. Their voice should be heard.”

**The Man Himself**

These words come from one of the big boys who has been very successful in growing his own contracting business as
AWCI President Cooley and AWCI’s First Ladies: (l to r): Brenda Boyd, Barbara Geyer, Elaine Navratil, Hope Nabity and Leanne Poellinger

Drywall, Inc. in Huntington, N.Y. But it’s pretty simple: “Do it right the first time! And treat everybody fairly.”

Cooley started in the business during the 1960s with a contractor who was also a past president of AWCI: Charles Valdini of Valdini Drywall—“One of the most decent guys I’ve ever worked with in my life. “He taught me to be an estimator and because the industry wasn’t very segmented in those days, I did almost anything else that came to mind, including working on sites. You had a job then and you did what you were told. My main responsibilities were getting blueprints, bringing them back to the office, reviewing them and doing quantity take-offs and so on.”

When someone has been in the industry for 40 years, you figure he has some interesting perspectives on changes, and Cooley is no different.

Then and Now

“The main change,” says Cooley, “is that there are many more requirements, fed-
erally, locally, health and safety wise. I’m not saying they are good or bad, but half the things we do today relate to complying with regulations. There’s OSHA, which we didn’t have years ago, with all its safety standards that are helpful. Our industry as a whole is fairly safe compared to other trades.

“We’ve seen metal studs replacing wood studs. I recall nailing wallboard onto wood studs. There are many types of board now, too.

“As for scope of work and workmanship, we do much more now. Years ago, a drywall contractor only did wallboard. Now, he does metal studs, wallboard, acoustic ceilings, doors and frames, miscellaneous carpentry, sometimes spray fireproofing and floors. So, the package has grown.

“The newest trend seems to be ergonomics. They’re looking at lightening wallboard to improve handling ability They may change the grip on the screw gun and other handheld tools so as to follow the proper alignment of the hand, wrist and arm to reduce carpal tunnel syndrome. Having not worked physically myself in a long time, I’d have to say that most of the improvements are good ones.

“Lastly, while there is a shortage of trained labor, comprehensive training programs are providing people who come to work with much more knowledgeable—not only about their craft, but about safety and other issues.”

A Second Opinion

Arthur E. Godsell, AWCI board member and president of Godsell Construction Corporation in Hicksville, N.Y., has
known Cooley as a fellow contractor and board member in AWCI for at least a decade.

Although they are in the same line of work and in the same geographical area, they have remained friendly competitors throughout—they have common causes and realities, of course, but it helps not having the same client base.

Godsell speaks fondly of Cooley as a “very conscientious, hard-working guy. He’s always looking out for his fellow board members and friends in the industry,” something Godsell learned first hand the moment he walked into the AWCI board meeting for the first time and Cooley took him under his wing, as he does with anyone who needs a helping hand. “Larry introduces them around, gets them involved in association details, parties and negotiations. He’s a person who wants to get people involved in things.

“And on the job, I know he’s worked for some very large companies and has completed successfully many very large jobs. His reputation in business is the same as it is as an individual—he’s a person who wants to finish the job, finish it fairly, and keep his clients, so he’s always looking out both for himself as well as his clients.

“I feel that AWCI will be well served by Larry as president because he’s the type of person who fits well in a group and wants to better his industry. At the risk of sounding repetitive, he’s not looking out just for himself but also other contractors and associations. He’s a consensus builder and wants the industry to better itself. He wants to be here, he’s genuinely here to do the job properly, and he’s not here just as a figurehead.”

Amen to that, and good luck at the helm, Cap’n.

About the Author

Steven Ferry is a free-lance writer for the construction industry. He is based in Dunedin, Fla.