



## An Interview with IRWA International President

WAYNE GOSS, SR/WA, R/W-NAC

BY BARBARA BILLITZER

With decades of public agency experience and a background in property management, Wayne brings a unique industry perspective to his new role as International President. During his 25 years with IRWA, he has served in virtually every leadership role at the Chapter, Region and International level. And although he may be perceived as a soft-spoken “good ole boy” from Louisiana, this interview shows that Wayne is a strategic thinker who is clearly focused on building Chapter participation, attracting new members and promoting IRWA’s relevance as a global leader in infrastructure real estate.

### As a longstanding volunteer, what has been your most rewarding experience?

I have had so many gratifying experiences over the last 25 years. Taking part in Chapter, Region and international initiatives, and having the opportunity to meet and get to know hundreds of members is certainly one of the most rewarding aspects. Not only have these colleagues helped me with career growth and expanding my professional knowledge, many of them have become exceptional friends.

### What are the benefits of giving back to your profession?

Returning a part of what I’ve gained from an organization like this has many benefits, both personally and professionally. One is realizing that I can actually help others who face similar challenges. By sharing our experiences, we are developing a core support group that will ultimately enhance all areas of our profession. Another benefit involves the transfer of knowledge to a younger generation of professionals who are new to the industry and focused on their career development. We are making significant inroads by supporting IRWA’s Young Professionals group, and given the increase in member participation in each Region, our commitment is paying off. Encouraging the growth and mission of this group is enabling us to impact that part of the Association’s future that is still within our realm of influence.

### What is the greatest benefit of being a member?

Initially, it was the realization that I could meet and associate with people who worked through some of the same challenges that I was facing. Suddenly, by virtue of membership, I had access to people who not only could—but would—willingly offer advice about work situations that had me stalled. Virtually every member I've known has taken steps to not only improve and educate themselves in our industry practices, but they have also shown a wholehearted willingness to share that knowledge with peers. That's one of the greatest benefits of this organization. We all want to help each other, and this benefits everyone.

I believe that members appreciate different benefits depending on where they are in their career and professional development aspirations. The Association's emphasis on high ethical standards positions each of us as being among the best our industry has to offer. Our certifications and designations work to differentiate our members as experts in their field, while our Chapter events, conferences and networking opportunities help members stay on the forefront of a constantly changing industry. In the end, the benefits are limited only by the advantages you seek.

### What has been your biggest challenge on the IEC to date?

First, let me say that being a part of the International Executive Committee during this time of the Association's growth and advancement has been exhilarating, mainly because we strongly believe that our efforts are improving opportunities for all of our members. All of us on the IEC consider ourselves to be members just like everyone else. The main difference is that, as elected representatives, we know that our colleagues have put their trust in us because they believe we can make this a better Association. And while some of our decisions are not unanimous, we recognize that the final outcomes will ultimately be better for the Association as a whole. The challenge is in communicating that message to members.

Implementing new ideas and initiatives will strengthen our Association, but it is crucial that we provide the reasoning and potential benefits from these actions to all of our members. We need to do a better job of explaining that, even though a small percentage of members may not agree with each action or decision, the vast majority do.

### What role has education played in your career?

I am undoubtedly a more effective agent as a result of the knowledge I've gained from IRWA courses, conferences and professional development opportunities. And this has definitely differentiated me in my field, especially when compared to those who have not taken advantage of these opportunities.

Taking courses outside my area of expertise has given me exposure to areas that, under normal situations, I wouldn't have had in my day-to-day job. This has really helped me to understand the bigger picture, while giving me points of view from outside my immediate responsibilities. The ability to converse knowledgeably and assure those in differing fields that I do understand their position and concerns has proven invaluable.

### What are some of your most immediate priorities?

My top priority is to deliver the message that there is tangible value associated with IRWA membership. I want to emphasize that IRWA membership, in and of itself, serves to differentiate a member from a non-member. The opportunity for and availability of education and training in specific industry practices assures employers that IRWA members are the better choice when it comes to hiring.

The fact that our organization is becoming recognized worldwide as a leader regarding global infrastructure real estate puts us on a level far above those not associated with us. I want to continue to grow that advantage, both in North America and around the world, to cement our position as the "go-to" organization for superior infrastructure real estate-related personnel.



Celebrating his new leadership position, Wayne and his wife of 30 years, Frances.

Given some of the feedback I have received from members regarding a few of the actions we've taken, I will also be making communication a priority during my Presidency. In the coming year, I plan to visit with as many Chapters as possible, to hear their concerns first-hand and explain the rationale behind whatever decision has prompted those concerns.

### As membership expands globally, how does this benefit the current members?

As an organization, we have undergone significant ideological as well as structural reforms in the recent past. These changes are part of IRWA's strategic plan that will help us build on our past successes and catapult our Association to new heights.

We are now, and will be even more so in the future, a global marketplace. Our education and ethics programs are becoming recognized worldwide as the gold standard in our field. This recognition translates into an advantage in every country we're known in, including our North American base. As right of way becomes more widely recognized as a profession that is in demand around the world, everyone benefits. Our profile is raised and we are more likely to become a key player whose "seat at the table" becomes essential, and whose credentials and designations carry real meaning. Thus, global expansion provides many indirect advantages even if you have no intention of ever crossing an international border.



Focused on growth at the grassroots Chapter level, Wayne welcomes members from IRWA's newest Chapter in Mexico.

If you are an employee of a local public agency and will always be, the advantage may be the respect gained by your affiliation with a global organization and access to a worldwide consortium of professionals in your field from whom you can solicit information. If you are employed by a consulting company or engineering firm, you not only have those same advantages, but just imagine the contacts should your company decide to seek out and obtain work in other countries.

### What role will Chapters play in this global expansion?

Chapters will always be the core of our organization. No matter what level of influence we confer upon regional or international governance units, the folks in the Chapters are the entire reason we exist. This is and will continue to be true whether the chapter is located in Rome,

Georgia in the United States or in Rome, Italy.

The entire structure of IRWA's governance has always been designed to support the Chapters with tools and resources that help their members become more educated, while giving them opportunities to increase their career potential. As I see it, the role of governance at the regional and international levels— along with support from our excellent headquarters staff—is to support education and communications for and between these groups who band together locally to achieve more professional results.

### What's the latest on IRWA's International Committees and Communities of Practice?

IRWA continues to undertake strategic moves that are designed to better serve and provide more value to our members. A major change involved separating the needs of our industry segments from our specific disciplines of practice. By doing so, we were able to build industry-centric pathways to train members in our specific industry segments, which include Oil and Gas Pipelines, Transportation, Public Agencies and Electric/Utilities. And since the four industries intersect with an assortment of disciplines, it became clear that involvement with the appropriate disciplines was paramount to the success of the International Committees.

The Discipline Communities of Practice (CoPs) have since become the brain trusts they had the potential to be. By releasing them from the burden of



At a 2013 Education Foundation fundraising event, Wayne demonstrated that he is a good sport while taking (and serving) drink orders from the members in attendance.

administrative functions, they have gained traction and grown their membership base exponentially. While some are still adjusting to the new paradigm, most of the CoPs have taken advantage of this opportunity to address their specific knowledge base and are now working closely with the industries they support. We are pleased to see so much involvement in the CoPs, which currently include Asset Management, Environmental, Relocation Assistance, Surveying and Engineering, and Valuation. We want to garner more awareness for our discipline-specific CoPs, since they are open to all members and everyone is encouraged to participate, regardless of their geographic location or experience level.

### Where do you see the most industry growth potential?

Wow, I could use a crystal ball to help answer that one. A year or two ago, oil and gas would have been a safe bet. Now, all across the nation, we are seeing the results of the price slump in oil by the slowdown in pipeline construction. Public agency and transportation project activity is heavily dependent on governmental spending, which is unpredictable at best. I do see a bit of a bright spot in the electric and utility segment due to an ever-increasing demand for the product, along with a more reasonable decision-making process related to infrastructure funding. In light of the industry-specific education products and pathways we are developing recently, I look forward to gaining momentum in that particular segment. Come back in about a year, and we'll see if I should make plans to go to the casino.

### Do you anticipate any major industry changes in the near future?

I hope to see a reversion in oil prices, along with a rise in natural gas that would allow the industry to return to more robust pipeline construction relatively soon. Public agencies and transportation will likely continue at a somewhat flat rate, and I hope that I'm at least in the ballpark on my prediction for electric and utilities.

### What role will young professionals play in IRWA's future growth?

We continue to actively cultivate our younger and less experienced members. We are close to achieving a critical mass in having our YP contingent become a fully immersed subset of our organization. We are pleased that Aimie Mims, SR/WA, a young professional, just joined the ranks of the IEC as our new International Secretary. This bodes well for our efforts to recognize and involve the new generation in our leadership ranks. The reality is, they offer a new perspective and help some of us to see what's possible in the future with regard to using advanced technology in our profession. I, for one, look forward to having someone hold my hand as I stumble down this clearly advantageous road.

### What would you say to a newcomer about a career in right of way?

I would tell them that the profession is experiencing impressive expansion, and as a result, there is great potential for career growth. And while other industries may find themselves being replaced by automation, our industry excels because of the person-to-person communication and skill required to amicably settle complex, or even simple, acquisitions. So even though we are taking advantage of technology for streamlining our manual processes, our landowner communications will always rely on the need for a low-tech "chat over coffee" practice. These days, that kind of job security is very welcome.

### What do you hope to accomplish during your term as President?

In short, we are—and will continue to be—a constantly evolving Association. Much of the change has occurred in a relatively short period of time and some of our members have yet to fully absorb how this all fits together, resulting in some reluctance to fully embrace the changes. What I intend to focus on in the upcoming year is to make myself available "in the trenches" to our members

at the Chapter level. I want to fully explain some of the important changes we've implemented and address questions that may have left some of our members feeling as though they have been left out of the loop. It is my goal to assure that we, as the International Governing Council, fully represent our Chapters and have the ability to clarify the reasoning behind each of our strategic decisions.

I also plan to ensure that more of our members become aware of these new ways to differentiate themselves. Some of our members in Australia recently obtained their SR/WA designation by taking advantage of the online courses we offer. With the new industry-specific pathways that IRWA has created, we plan to encourage more members to become credentialed by reaching out and offering membership and education to right of way practitioners around the world.

### Any closing thoughts?

Have you heard about my new blog? I encourage all members to reach out and communicate with me in the coming year at [www.irwapresidentsblog.org](http://www.irwapresidentsblog.org). As your International President, I welcome your comments, questions and insight. In fact, I hope to share some of your feedback in future issues of the magazine! 🌟

