

Behind The Mission

Tim Dietz's Influence On The SSA

BY JERRY LAMARTINA

Self Storage Association (SSA) President and CEO Tim Dietz has an important message about the industry that he has represented for two decades. "We're vital to America, an essential part of the economic engine and mobility of our culture," he says.

"We certainly suffer from misconceptions," he continues, noting that they are the result of unavoidable elements such as television shows and occasional negative news stories. "The real story is that there is a unique need for self-storage in the United States," Dietz says.

"Our studies find that at least one in 10 households will use self-storage every year. That reflects a very mobile culture, which has created demand for this real estate sector. A typical day in self-storage is three friends and a truck or a family moving items they want to be safe as they're going through a relocation, not selling customers' goods," which he says is simply the only collections process prescribed by law.

Dispelling those misconceptions has enabled him and his team to represent and protect the self-storage industry in just about every state, many major markets, and occasionally at the U.S. Capitol.

Having cut his teeth advocating for the energy and telecommunications industries in the 1990s,

he subsequently became the first lobbyist with a national scope for the self-storage sector. That was in August 2004, when he joined the Alexandria, Va.-based SSA.

After establishing that position, he took on the role of chief operating officer before his promotion to president and CEO in 2015.

Dietz understands the importance of building strong relationships. They are the glue that holds careers together and the tools that have enabled critical representation of the self-storage industry for two decades.

"I'd like to think that I try to get along with everybody," he says. "You can't run an association without associating with and welcoming everybody who belongs under your umbrella. If you're the executive of a trade association, relationships come at many levels. Most importantly are relationships with our members, ultimately who we are here to serve. And of course, there's management of capable staff that fulfill our mission. And if you even wanted to go deeper, you could say management of the relationships with capable and engaged board members." Dietz estimates he has worked with about 90 board members over the past 20 years.

Running a national trade association comes with its share of challenges, including frustrations in





Ron Havner and Tim Dietz

dealing “with the full scope of the industry, competitors with competing agendas,” Dietz says.

“What our members have to say on our platforms may not always be popular, or even accurate, but that doesn’t mean we shouldn’t provide them a forum,” he says. “That’s why you meet as an association. What people have to say, and their business practices, are their business.”

Nevertheless, Dietz certainly urges caution. “If something appears unfair to consumers, it can lead to scrutiny on the industry, new regulations, and legislative threats.”

The SSA was founded in 1975 in Denver, which means it will celebrate its 50-year anniversary next year. It has about 6,000 member companies, including the 23 state associations that it represents as well. The Golden Jubilee celebration will include a party at Allegiant Stadium in Las Vegas, where the NFL’s Raiders play, during their Las Vegas conference a year from September.

Because the association didn’t have a lobbyist until 2004, the self-storage industry largely lacked substantial representation, he says. “The industry was still coming into its own in the early 2000s, still emerging,” he says. “Advocacy for the sector was playing catch-up.”

Since then, the association has influenced nearly 500 laws that have redefined the regulatory landscape.

“Me and my successor, Joe Doherty [senior vice president of legal and legislation], could write a book about nearly every state capital, because that’s where real estate is regulated,” says Dietz. “We’ve directed the contributions for the collective good and hired representatives for the sector in dozens of venues around the country.”

Dietz is a free-market capitalist. Any pro-business advocate prefers a hands-off political culture, he says. For self-storage, that means fewer taxes, appropriate assessments, sensible regulations on insurance and collections, and overall reasonable treatment of the industry.

“When you have budget-thirsty governments looking to our sector as a solution, that usually means taxes,” he says. “If we are not here as a voice, then you’re going to find that regulations are influenced by interests from outside our industry.”

At roughly 60 or 70 years old, the self-storage industry is in its adolescence compared to much older industries, such as manufacturing, agriculture, and health care, Dietz says.

“We’re taking our place alongside the predominant trade associations in real estate,” Dietz says, “such as the American Hotel & Lodging Association, the National Apartment Association,

NAREIT [the National Association of Real Estate Investment Trusts], and the International Council of Shopping Centers.”

It’s a big job. Self-storage’s annual revenue in the United States is estimated to be about \$50 billion, he says. Still, 70 percent of self-storage owners can be considered small businesses. The industry had “the most impressive growth of any commercial sector during the past 20 years, which makes everybody invested before that a pioneer.”

Dietz says, “Those visionaries were the basis of this organization.”

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Past To Present

The SSA was a \$3.5 million association with seven staffers in 2004. Now it’s a nearly \$20 million organization with about 20 staffers.

The SSA also administers 23 state self-storage associations, including Florida (FSSA), Illinois (ILSSA), Maryland (MDSSA), Virginia (VASSA), Pennsylvania (PASSA), New Jersey (NJSSA), and North Carolina (NCSSA). It added this element to their structure about 15 years ago “because we believe state associations need to be strong to support the industry at local levels,” and “that wasn’t the case everywhere,” he says.

Dietz offered a few examples of problems state self-storage associations have faced: obstacles to the collections process in New York, rent control in Georgia and Texas, as well as sales taxes in several states. “The local dynamic is critical to the well-being of the industry,” he says.

Current SSA Chairperson Alyssa Quill of Lancaster, Pa., knows well how hard Dietz works to ensure reasonable treatment of the industry. Quill is CEO of Storage Asset Management LLC (SAM) based in York, Pa. She has known Dietz for about 15 years and worked with him for about 10 years.

"I think Tim really, really cares what the people he works for in this industry, and with, need and want," Quill says. "He's always thinking, 'OK, how does this help self-storage owners and operators?' Or 'How does this help industry vendors?' Or 'What does this potential law mean for our industry?' Or 'What do the people who work with me at the SSA—how will this change affect their lives personally?'" Always thinking about customer and

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co-worker needs is probably his biggest strength as a leader. And I think he's very good at balancing those when the needs or desires might be different for different people."

Adjustments to the SSA since Dietz took over reflected the self-storage industry's changing demands, he says. The industry is no longer under the radar and has encountered "threats that 25 or 50 years ago we never would have seen."

Quill thinks Dietz's biggest impacts may have started with the laws enacted that protected self-storage, but subsequently he has steered the SSA ship to financially healthier waters. And he has "really created a great environment for people to work."

"So, he's hired and developed great people on that team," she says. "He has many people on his team that have been working for SSA for 20-plus years. They enjoy working in this industry. They especially enjoy working for Tim. And it shows in their years of service. ... Tim is very good at working with a diverse group of people. The board has a new chair every year. That can be challenging, but he handles it very well."

Dietz and the board communicate about association business regularly, she says. This can include big issues affecting the association and the industry, the association's strategic plan for the coming year, decisions that need to be made, and plans for big events.

"In many cases, he's letting me know what's happening and giving reassurance," Quill says. "In some cases, he'll say, 'Here's what the team would like to do, but we need to put this to the executive committee or the whole board for a vote.' And then we'll schedule a meeting and figure out what's going on next. He runs a very good organization. Because he's such a good leader, there's not a huge amount of work and stress put on the board."

Originally from Southern California, his father's military career brought him to the Washington D.C. area where he attended George Mason University and became engrossed with politics. Now 57, he credits much of his professional development and his skill as a leader to the late Mike Scanlon, whom he succeeded in 2015.

"He recognized that this organization could be something much bigger than it was when we both joined the association in 2004," Dietz says of Scanlon. "He taught me not to be afraid to invest in the growth of this organization and the expansion of our mission on behalf of the industry. And not to be afraid to make mistakes, of which we both made quite a few."

In a 2015 SSA news release announcing Dietz's promotion, he praised Scanlon for having built "an excellent team of association professionals who share his vision of industry representation and membership services. For more than a decade, Mike has steadily improved the member value proposition of the SSA, establishing a stature consistent with the leading national real estate trade associations."

In the spirit of Scanlon's influence, Dietz's advice for anyone who wants to rise to leadership is unadorned.

"It starts with treating people well," he says. "And remember that life is about a lot more than work." ■

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