



A proposed Naperville city ordinance was going to cost Alarm Detection Systems, Inc. more than a half-million dollars a year. That made bells go off in the Chamber's Legislative Committee.

by Kenn Tomasch

CAUSE FOR ALARM

It would have been an easy enough thing to miss—just another in a long line of issues to be debated at a Naperville City Council meeting on some random Tuesday. The City planned to require all commercial and multi-family fire alarms be directly connected to the Naperville Fire Department's alarm monitoring system.

"Well, that maybe on its surface sounds like it might be a decent idea," allowed Ray Kinney of MinuteMan Press in Naperville. "That is, if I didn't have an alarm company that bills significant amounts of dollars and said 'Wait a second.'"

Alarm Detection Systems, Inc. of Aurora is just that sort of company, one of many that would have been affected by a mandatory fire alarm system ordinance.

ADS' vice president, Ed Bonifas, not only said "wait a second," he said, "Oh, no, here we go again."

Five years after the company had unsuccessfully sued the village of Hinsdale in an attempt to stop a similar ordinance and five years after Naperville had last tried to enact it, Bonifas was looking at his business taking a major hit.

"About \$600,000 a year in revenue would have been impacted directly," Bonifas said. "But the fire alarm monitoring is one of the key relationships that we have with our customers. So, an awful lot more revenue could have been put at risk by losing the alarm monitoring piece of this business."

The proposal would have had ripple effects to more than just alarm monitoring companies.

"However well intended (this) may be, it would mean a change in equipment that could be very costly," said Janet Lang of Lang Property Management, which manages several properties in the city. "Associations have one alarm for each building, so the cost is multiplied by that number. Also, contracts with private alarm companies, which are usually a package that includes monitoring, maintenance and testing, are in place that could be costly to break. I feel we should have a choice."

ADS brought the matter to the Naperville Area Chamber of Commerce's Legislative Committee, which stepped in to slow down the speeding train.

"It was through the Chamber that we were able to slow things down and hopefully have

cooler heads prevail and take a really good look before they act(ed) on it,” Bonifas said. “The Chamber’s Legislative Committee really stopped it from going to Council as quickly as they wanted.”

Such victories on behalf of business are nothing new for the Legislative Committee, which meets monthly, yet works daily to make sure local, state and federal lawmakers hear what Naperville-area businesses are saying.

“Basically what we try to do is educate the business community about critical issues that impact business, it’s very simple,” explained Tom Kallay of Nicor and the Legislative Committee’s Chairman. “Be it a local legisla-



Ray Kinney, MinuteMan Press Naperville, is co-chair of the Chamber’s Legislative Committee.

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MinuteMan Press

tive initiative, statewide initiative, federal initiative, anything that has to do with business. What we try to do is educate and inform and engage the membership to do something, either for or against whatever is out there.”

“I think it’s arguably one of the most important things the Chamber does,” offered Kinney, who is also the committee’s co-chair.

It wasn’t always that way. Though the Chamber has been involved in legislative issues dating back nearly as far as its founding in 1913, it’s only been fairly recently that the committee’s bite has been worse than its bark.

“We maybe had ten members on it,” remembered local attorney W. Brand Bobosky, a former chair of the committee. “We met infrequently, seldom had a public official in attendance and infrequently took action that affected an outcome on the city, county, state or federal level.”

“It’s not as tough as it used to be,” Kallay admitted. “I can tell you that we started off in a little room and now we have overflow crowds. So clearly the message is getting out, clearly people are listening.”

The ranks of those who are definitely listening include State House Republican Leader Tom Cross, State Representatives Jim Meyer, Joe Dunn and Randy Hultgren, Senators Kirk Dillard and Peter Roskam and Congresswoman Judy Biggert, all of whom are frequent attendees at committee meetings on the second Monday of each month.

“We have the reputation and credibility in Naperville where legislators do listen to us,”

Kallay noted. “The legislators show up to our monthly meetings, and they wouldn’t if it was a waste of time. They know that the Chamber has a great reputation and it brings value to them.”

It also brings value to Chamber Members, who see the inner workings of the public policy process as having a big effect that ripples outward, touching the entire business community.

“I feel like this is where the action is,” explained Bev Patterson Frier of the Patterson Partnership, a regular meeting attendee. “This is where all the decisions are made, so I feel like this is a very critical part of the Chamber. When we go to our monthly luncheons it’s very nice



Fire starter: a proposed public smoking ban is just one of the issues tackled by the Legislative Committee.



Tom Kallay, Nicor and chair of the Chamber's Legislative Committee

and we have great speakers, but the work is done here, in the Legislative Committee.”

“We can't always keep up with the ever-changing political landscape,” remarked Margaret Brennan of Brennan & Brosnan, LLC. “The Legislative Committee helps us by keeping us informed about what is happening and making recommendations for positions that would be in the best interest of the business community.”

“As a commercial realtor, I think the input that the committee has on local ordinances is extremely valuable,” remarked Vic Dunbar of American Commercial Real Estate, Inc. “I have to sell “location” to my clients everyday. One of the most important factors when considering a location is whether or not the local community is business friendly. The legislative committee is a strong voice for business which constantly reminds our legislators how important it is to consider the effects of their actions on all businesses, whether they are already here or are considering relocation to Naperville.”

Still, the Chamber's legislative efforts are almost the best-kept secret of Membership. While the monthly meetings attract large crowds, it's still a small fraction of the organization's 2,000 Members.

The reason most give for not getting more involved? Time, or lack of it.

“It's easy to understand,” said Illinois State Senator Steve Rauschenberger (R-22nd District). “I was a young retailer myself and borrowed money and bought a store and know what it's like to be concerned and work a 55 or 60 hour week like many business people do, but it's critically important over time that business people recognize that so much of their business is driven by public policy decisions.

“(But) the investment of time that they might make in helping a legislator or a mayor or an alderman or a county board member understand their business and the implications of public policy on their business is just one of the most valuable things that they can do for the political system and to the extent that they can help support candidates that they develop a trust level with, it's critically important.”

There's an old adage that says, “Business doesn't vote.” Most business owners are simply too busy running their own companies to give top-of-mind awareness to the political process until it affects their bottom line.

“I think until you have an event that (makes you say) ‘Hey, that affects me,’ you just kind of expect the Chamber to go on and do their thing,” Kinney said. “(You might think) ‘They're thinking about big business.’ Well,

they're not. They're involved with legislative issues that affect all size businesses.”

The Chamber supports and promotes:

A competitive and fair tax climate, including supporting tax incentives to enhance the business climate and to encourage economic growth and job creation, and opposing fees imposed against business being used as principal general revenue;

An education system that produces and sustains a qualified workforce, ensuring the next generation of workers will be qualified;

Regional transportation infrastructure, a vital part of our economy; A competitive business climate, including reform in the areas of health care, medical malpractice insurance and worker's compensation statutes;

A fair and equitable civil justice system;

Free and fair trade in a global economy, which allows business to compete in today's complex world markets; and

Incentives for investment in research, development and technology that will help business grow.

These key positions are the building blocks of the Chamber's legislative strategy, but educating the Membership is the mortar that helps build the bridge between business and lawmakers.

“I don't think everybody truly understands it, because I needed an education myself,” admitted Mary Ann Bobosky of Advocates



The Legislative Committee meets on the second Monday of each month

Building Communities. "But, I think if you come and find out that you really can have a voice, that's very important, especially for small businesses, having their voice heard. And legislators do listen."

"It's amazing to me the number of things that come before Legislative and the tentacles that it has that affect us on a day-in, day-out basis," marveled Dave Martin of Russell Martin Carpet & Rugs, Ltd. "Unless you're

"The Naperville Area Chamber of Commerce has the best government affairs committee of any chamber in the state of Illinois."

Doug Whitley,
President,
Illinois Chamber
of Commerce

involved in it, you might be totally unaware of the ramifications until it's too late.

"The thing the committee does is it brings all the cards to the table and spreads them out face-up, and you get to see what the ramifications are for your business and you go 'whoa.'"

Just a few of the cards recently spread face-up on the table by the Legislative Committee include:

The Chamber's Small Office/Home Office group, led by chair Bruce Lund of Accounting Project Support, worked with the Naperville Area Homeowners Confederation on the City of Naperville's new Home Based business Ordinance. "Nowhere else could the City have gotten the type of input, details, and suggestions as they did from this joint effort," noted Chuck Schlabach, the NAHC's president and a Chamber Member.

"We requested a letter from the Chamber of Commerce, through the Legislative Committee, in support of our application for the first Supportive Living License in DuPage County from the State of Illinois," said Laura Weren of Tabor Hills Retirement Community in Naperville. "We were granted the license and recognize the Chamber's

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The Chamber delegation on a 2005 trip to Washington, DC

role in this success and look forward to the groundbreaking yet this year.”

“Two years ago, the Service Employees International Union was able to push a bill through the State House called the Displaced Building Service Workers Act,” recalled Daniel C. Overton, CEO of ELA Security, Inc. “This would have prevented a new office building owner or service contractor from replacing any worker in the building. Through a legislative committee meeting, I and other committee members were able to educate several of our legislators and senators on the adverse impact of the legislation. The Chamber joined with the Building Owners and Managers Association and the State Chamber to defeat the bill in the Senate.”

Naperville’s proposed citywide public smoking ban lit a fire under bar and restaurant owners. The Legislative Committee reiterated to City Council its opposition to a local smoking ban and urged a public decision-making process that would ensure a level playing field for all potentially-affected businesses.

The City Council voted to table the preparation of the mandatory fire alarm monitoring ordinance at its June 20th meeting. Meeting minutes note that City staff will meet with representatives of the alarm industry “to make a full determination on what the problem is that the City is attempting to cure, whether or not the private sector is capable of solving the problem, and/or if the Fire Department has a better solution to be presented in a report format for Council’s recommendation.”

“It’s critically important over time that business people recognize that so much of their business is driven by public policy decisions.”

State Senator
Steve Rauschenberger

The metaphoric fire had been extinguished – for the time being.

“Personally, I think it’s great,” said Kallay. “I wish I could take all the credit, but obviously I can’t, it’s a team effort. But that’s a prime example of when an issue was brought to our attention by a Member, we educated the community about it, we discussed it with the city, and now it’s a non-issue. That’s a great example, but there’s a myriad of other examples as well.”

As for Alarm Detection Systems? Ed Bonifas isn’t ready to completely relax yet, and he’s grateful the Legislative Committee isn’t about to let its guard down, either.

“You need a watchdog to keep an eye on government to make sure that they don’t make it so difficult to do business that you can’t,” he concluded.

One thing is clear: business has nothing to fear and everything to gain by getting involved.

Reactive, Proactive, Politically Active

The Chamber took a bold, and some would say long-needed, step to increase its legislative efforts last October with the formation of its very own political action committee (PAC).

The Naperville Area Chamber Political Action Committee (NACPAC) is a totally independent, autonomous not-for-profit corporation that is not affiliated in any way with any political party. It allows the business community to participate, appropriately and through documented channels, in the political process by supporting individuals and causes that reflect the opinions and positions of area business people.

“We have developed a very strong Legislative Committee, and our elected officials have largely favorable reactions to hearing its positions,” noted Laura Crawford, the Chamber’s Senior Vice President, Marketing, Membership & Legislative Affairs. “With NACPAC, business can be proactive instead of reactive and begin to have a real effect on who

sits on the legislative bodies that make policy affecting business.”

By raising funds to actively support candidates and legislation (something the Chamber cannot do on its own), NACPAC can influence the makeup of City Council, County Boards and the state legislature.

“Through the PAC process, we can identify candidates that are pro-growth, pro-business, and have our best interests at heart and we can support them financially,” said Ray Kinney of MinuteMan Press Naperville.

While the idea of a local political action committee was not a new one, serious discussions on and plans for NACPAC’s formation gathered steam after the Legislative Committee’s examination of the voting records of local legislators.

Because NACPAC’s membership ranks are as diverse as those of the Chamber itself, there are bound to be differences of opinion when it comes down to deciding on a candidate or cause to support.

NACPAC

Access. Influence. Impact

“Per its bylaws, NACPAC can’t support or expend any funds to a candidate or toward supporting legislation without at least a three-fourths vote of all of the PAC’s Directors,” Crawford explained. “We really want to build a consensus of business people on candidates and bills to support or oppose.”

Any Chamber Member in good standing can become a member of NACPAC if they pay annual NACPAC dues and support its purpose and goals, while non-Chamber members who contribute to the PAC and support its purpose and goals are classified as “Supporters” of NACPAC.

You can find out more about this new part of the Chamber’s legislative efforts by visiting www.nacpac.net, where you can read NACPAC’s purpose, goals, bylaws and more.

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