



THE ADVOCACY ISSUE

Part 2: THE TEAM

OAN members and experts work in tandem to protect nurseries

MEN AND WOMEN roaming marble hallways in expensive attire — that's what people may envision when they think of lobbying. And while professional advocates play a role, the OAN Advocacy Team has more players — and more layers. According to OAN Executive Director Jeff Stone, it takes everyone to advance the interests of the nursery industry, with members playing a pivotal role as citizen lobbyists.

"We try to encourage constituents to have conversations with their legislators, while giving them the full backing to help shape policy through the association," he said.

Steve Shropshire, a shareholder with the Jordan Ramis P.C. law firm, who serves as the OAN's legal counsel, agreed.

"The members do a great job of telling real-life stories and creating compelling reasons for legislators to listen," he said. "They're used to listening to lobbyists all day long, so when we get our members in the building, it's incredibly powerful."

Here are the key players and their roles.

The executive — Jeff Stone

Stone is a seasoned political operative who cut his teeth working for U.S. Sen. Bob Packwood (R-Oregon), then served as the chief of staff for the Metro regional government in Portland, Oregon. He manages the association on behalf of the OAN Board of Directors, which represents the members and serves as his ultimate boss.

Stone was brought on board as the OAN director of government relations in 2007. In 2011, the board chose him to be the new executive director. He became responsible for all association functions, but he still devotes a large chunk of his time to government relations because it is one of the most important things OAN does.

But he knows from experience that any outreach is meaningless without an honest, credible and respectful approach. "I want to have the association earn their trust (as a resource)," he said.

Stone will frequently tell new legislators, "Talk to others about what it's like to deal with us. We will talk to you about both sides of the issue, but if we have a viewpoint, you're not going to leave a meeting without knowing it."

Leigh Geschwill, an owner at F&B Farms & Nursery (Woodburn, Oregon), served as OAN president in 2016, and then served as OAN Government Relations Committee chair in 2017.

"Jeff, in some respects, creates the master outline of issues that we're interested in, and avenues that we work within to

address those," she said. "He's sort of, as he says, the gatekeeper. He's keeping an eye on the master outline of what is important."

The lobbyist — Elizabeth Remley

Remley is a partner with Thorn Run Partners, a lobbying firm with offices in Salem, Oregon, Washington, D.C., and Los Angeles. The firm lobbies on behalf of the OAN, with Remley serving as the association's primary representative in the Oregon State Capitol building.



Remley tracks legislation and rulemaking processes, whether the Legislature is in or out of session and builds relationships with decision makers. Other firm members, including vice president Miles Pengilly and partner Dan Bates, also help as needed.

"We end up being the liaison or the spokespeople or the watchful eye for any client we have," she said. "Our job is to be in the middle of everything, all the time. OAN may not need to be in the middle of everything. We are in rooms that maybe OAN doesn't get invited in, but maybe that's where we learn about things that may be impactful for nurseries."

During the session, Thorn Run will supply its in-house briefings on bills that are working their way through the Legislature. The firm will track bills and, in conjunction with the team, assign labels such as "monitor," "support," "oppose" or "don't care."

"Thorn Run will attend hearings and work sessions on the bills as they move and keep the rest of the team advised about proposed amendments and changes in language," Shropshire said.

He added: "Their primary role is to be the day-to-day political operatives and understand the political and interpersonal dynamics at the Legislature, and to use that knowledge to our advantage to be able to accomplish our objectives."

The legal counsel — Steve Shropshire

Shropshire is a shareholder with Jordan Ramis PC, a legal firm with offices in Lake Oswego and Bend, Oregon, and Vancouver, Washington.



"We serve as lobby counsel and political counsel, evaluating legislation, policy, rule-making, offering support and developing testimony, and providing direct testimony ourselves," Shropshire said.

Shropshire takes the lead for the firm on OAN-related matters, but other attorneys also work on the association's behalf ➤

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as the situation demands. As needed, the attorneys will look at bill language to ensure the industry is protected.

His work extends beyond short-term objectives, however. He monitors legislative trends affecting the nursery industry, and the ongoing evolution of issues for the long term.

According to Geschwill: "Steve's really a good one for saying if we do this here, then (these things) could happen later. I think he works really well in concert with Jeff. He will alert Jeff that we're starting to see these kinds of changes and these kinds of actions are coming up for customers in the court system."

The president — Jim Simnitt

The OAN president is a member who serves for one year and chairs the OAN Board of Directors, but their duties aren't limited to meetings. They also day-to-day involvement in the nonprofit's political outreach, monitoring issues, providing input to the Advocacy Team, and getting involved with testimony when required, or even talking to the news media.

The current president is Jim Simnitt. Kyle Fessler will take at the annual convention in December, which this year will take place online.

"The president's job is to represent all of the members," Geschwill said. "They're really trying to make the issues that we care about personal and real to our elected officials."

The GR chairman — Kyle Fessler

In addition to the board, the OAN has a variety of committees, and the Government Relations Committee is perhaps the most active. It meets monthly, hearing updates on various issues. Legislators, state officials and even

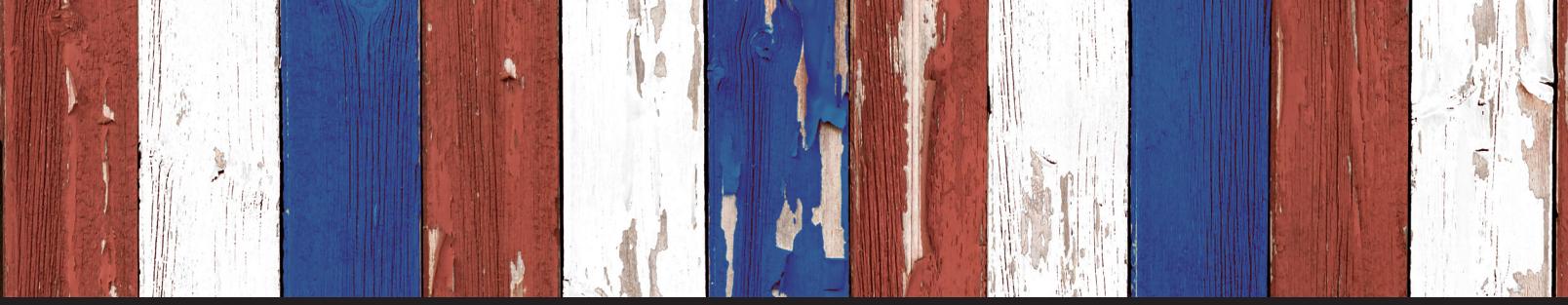
members of Congress are frequent guests.

Kyle Fessler of Woodburn Nursery & Azaleas chairs the committee. Mark Bigej, an owner of grower-retailer Al's Garden & Home, will take over when Fessler becomes OAN president in November.

"I look at the role as just coming in as a member voice and being able to speak on behalf of the other members," Fessler said. "[Speaking as a grower] has a greater impact when you talk to legislators. They hear it from someone who experiences the

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impact on a daily basis."

With COVID-19, the OAN was forced to stop holding Government Relations Committee meetings in person. The meetings were moved to Zoom and became more frequent. Officials that didn't have

time to drive to the OAN office had time to log on and chat, and several did. More members participated, too.

"Those meetings gave access to a wider scope of the membership to the things we do and the types of meetings we

conduct," Geschwill said. "Those were all well done and the members conducted themselves to their credit in terms of representing the breadth of issues that we encounter. In person is great as well, but a good case could be made for using that type of format going ahead, particularly if we're focusing on a particular issue."

The 'sounding board'

In addition to member leaders with specific roles, OAN also has an informal "sounding board" that Stone consults frequently. In addition to the president and the GR chair, it includes OAN Executive Committee members and sometimes past presidents. The association's primary legal counsel (Shropshire) and lobbyist (Remley) also take part in the discussion, which is almost always over e-mail.

"Jeff has his group which is the ready team during the legislative session, and that group is on the 12-email-a-day chain, and is asked to be the team that looks at legislation as it is introduced and known to us," Shropshire said. "It shows the value the members involved place on that process, because of their willingness to contribute their volunteer time."

Because of this rapid-response approach, the OAN can be nimble and more responsive to an ever-changing legislative process, communicating with elected officials and state and federal staff in real-time. "Other groups do it in committees and have to do in a pedantic way," Shropshire said.

Remley, the lobbyist, finds the member input essential to her job.

"We know members are busy," she said. "I'm always impressed and grateful the members take so much time to respond to an inquiry that I make because I know how much time it takes to run a business. We don't have a lot of clients where the members are as involved as they are at the OAN."

Building new leaders

Even with professionals on board, member involvement is the fuel that keeps the OAN Advocacy Team running.

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involved can take part in OAN's annual advocacy training sessions. They can then take on larger roles to benefit the industry.

"I think we are reaching further into the membership," Geschwill said. "Anytime you can develop more leadership and put more leadership in the pipeline, it's always helpful."

Bigej served as OAN president in 2017. Early on, he was nervous about testifying at hearings. Then he attended his first OAN Advocacy Training.

"I was deeply impacted," he said. "Thorn Run (the lobbying firm) did a good job running through the process and explaining how everything happens, but then they taught us how to be able to speak our mind and be effective doing that."

As Remley noted, the key to effective testimony is authenticity. "You have to tell a story a legislator can remember and that

they can repeat again to their colleagues, that doesn't go in one ear and out the other," she said. "We have to give real-life examples, and they have to be really compelling."

Stone coaches members in giving testimony that is concise, honest and effective, and being prepared to answer questions.

In a live situation, the OAN's professional team is always there to back them up.

"We'll never throw a member to the wolves," Remley said. "We're going to make it as easy for that member to participate as possible, both from a comfort level standpoint and a time commitment standpoint."

The trainings finish with members getting a chance to practice their new skills in a safe environment. Fessler credits the experience with helping him be a strong voice.

"I would have never stepped in and testified on a bill at the capital had it not been for my training and giving me the

confidence and go do that," he said.

The OAN continues to look for members willing to get involved — previous experience not required.

"We need people of all different types of abilities," Geschwill said. "Sometimes members don't realize they have talents or abilities that might be useful. We don't know about that, unless someone gets involved."

The investment of time often proves worthwhile for all involved.

"I get to watch people come into the leadership process of the GR Committee as relative novices," Shropshire said. "They may not have a lot of confidence speaking in public or putting issue arguments forward, but we see them blossom over the years to become not just powerful advocates, but better businesspeople as a result." ☈

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