



# THIRD CAREER is GOLDEN

for Incoming APPA  
President Strazdas

By Ruth E. Thaler-Carter

**P**eter Strazdas, now into his third career in facilities, brings a fierce passion for engagement and a career arc that is unusual in the field of educational facilities management to his new role as APPA President.

Strazdas, associate vice president of facilities management at Western Michigan University (WMU) in Kalamazoo, came to the world of physical plant and facilities through academia. For the past several years, he also has had a concurrent career in local government as mayor of a neighboring town.

With more than 35 years at WMU, “I’ve had a few different careers—a trifecta,” Strazdas says. “One-third of my career was in teaching, then a portion in construction, and now facilities and operations.” That combination makes him unusual in APPA ranks, as well as in the higher education community as a whole, and contributes to his sense of fulfillment in his work. “It’s pretty rare to find a person with this spectrum of experience,” he says.

“Part of my life was in academia, and that is now one of my clients.”

That scope of experience may set Strazdas apart, but it is not necessarily what motivates him. “What really fulfills me is the need to see this organization improve,” he said of his work at WMU. “It used to be that I had a project and finished it; being efficient gave me a great sense of fulfillment. Now, seeing every person in our department grow is what makes me feel good. Everyone has the same basic need: to be treated with respect and succeed. Knowing every day that this huge enterprise has improved, even a little bit, and that our employees are growing professionally gives me great joy.” He has a similar commitment to the growth and development of APPA members, and to APPA itself.

#### THE ACADEMIC YEARS

Originally from Boston and never intending to abandon his East Coast roots permanently, Strazdas







started at WMU as a graduate student, earning a master's degree in construction science and management education. He met his wife there, which established the foundation for staying put. "I had no intention of staying in Michigan," he says with a laugh. "My dream was of going back to Boston to teach construction management."

With that degree in hand, Strazdas felt that "I had to teach," and he did, even if it was not back home in Boston. From 1980–90, he was an assistant professor at the university. As the school "saw the opportunity to build, build, build," he moved from academia into his second career, working in campus construction as an owner. Having worked in academia gives him a perspective on that aspect of facilities management that is unusual among most of his subsequent colleagues in the field and within APPA, and tends to benefit his interactions with the academic side of campus life.

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Moving from construction into administration and facilities led Strazdas to 14 years in operations in physical plant and his third career, as director of maintenance. "I lived in construction and operations silos until 2009, when the silos merged."

The merger gave Strazdas the opportunity to expand his third career as the school's first associate vice president, presiding over a new department with "a more contemporary name" and about 500 employees. Today the department brings what he calls the traditional areas of physical plant management—architecture, engineering, and construction—together with operations. "We handle five areas—the classic big ones of maintenance, grounds and custodial, power plant, transportation, and facilities management information technology," he said.

Strazdas's turf is extensive, to say the least: WMU is home to \$200 million in construction volume: 151 buildings covering 8 million gross square feet, and 1,200 acres of land. His department has 440 full-time employees and about 100 student employees.

Overseeing such a huge operation may seem daunting, but Strazdas says he has an advantage over colleagues responsible for physical plant management at smaller schools. "Facilities managers at smaller campuses have a larger job," he says. "They have to manage everything themselves. I have directors for everything."

That doesn't mean that Strazdas isn't a hands-on manager; it's a matter of discipline and work style. "People do call me a workaholic," he admits. "I love working. This is not a job—I call it a passion." He keeps all of these balls in the air by organizing his time efficiently. "People see a lot of e-mails from me from late at night and early in the morning," he explains. "It's one of my religions—I *have* to get all e-mails done before I go to bed. Then I practice management by walking around—I do lots of walking and talking. You won't find me in my office very much. We can get honest discussions when you can talk to me one-on-one."

Strazdas is proud of his teams and their contributions to the quality of life at WMU. "We've done some special things with our team at the university in terms of energy conservation and sustainability," he says. "We reduced energy consumption by 17 percent while growing the whole campus by 15 percent."

Despite the size of the WMU campus and the wide scope of his responsibilities, work is not all work for Strazdas: "I enjoy going out with professional groups on Fridays—we get a lot done."

#### FINDING APPA

Like many APPA colleagues, Strazdas found his niche in the professional association through a coworker; in his case, John Goes, whom he calls "a significant mentor." He encouraged me to move from construction into administration and facilities

Pete and Rick Ball discuss progress on the construction of Heritage Hall.



in 1995,” Strazdas says. Goes also encouraged Strazdas to be active in APPA.

Strazdas started in APPA with his state chapter. “For about 10 to 15 years, MiAPPA [Michigan chapter] was ‘my APPA,’ but the larger organization didn’t resonate with me,” he recalled. “I had a significant number of relationships with everyone across the state and mentors at other universities. I was heavily engaged with the chapter.”

His family background came into play as Strazdas become more involved in other aspects of the association. “I grew up in a family with a commitment to community involvement, and I took those family genes as an expectation to participate and give back,” he says. Once he joined APPA, “I was engaged on steroids!” He served as president of the Michigan state chapter for several years, seeing the chapter grow under his leadership from presenting one conference a year to presenting two popular annual conferences and from about 300 to 500 members.

Further engagement came from a version of peer pressure: “What got me involved at the next level—MAPPA—was that someone said they wanted me to be involved,” says Strazdas. That led to another “somebody” saying he should be involved at the international level. He ran for APPA Secretary-Treasurer



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and won, then ran successfully for President-Elect, and now serves as APPA's 2015-16 President.

The influence of APPA membership has been invaluable for Strazdas, and he expects that value to continue. "Without a doubt, I have grown professionally through this APPA journey," he says. "Tools, development, opportunities to learn and to lead, to talk to my peers and have fresh perspectives from those who are walking in my shoes and understand the pressures we are all under—it has all been *huge*. APPA has helped me spread my wings."

As President, Strazdas plans to build on that value by focusing on the theme of *Advancing Our Profession through Engagement and Collaboration*. "Advancing our profession is what every APPA President is supposed to do," he notes, "but engagement stands out. The profession is changing so rapidly that we have to learn

to the strategic plan." He wants to see APPA grow and implement that plan.

#### THE VALUE OF APPA

Being involved in APPA has had great value for Strazdas, with the most important piece being the opportunity to create relationships and meet people he can turn to for input no matter what issues arise at work. "My Rolodex is bursting at the seams," says Strazdas. "APPA makes it so easy to pick up the phone and connect. It's a secret code among colleagues who are prioritizing our responses, along with a whole catalog of stuff to do and buy for personal development and campus improvements."

Because Strazdas firmly believes that APPA programs, events, courses, publications, and related resources do not need a hard sell—thanks to their obvious quality and value—he would take a "soft-sell approach" to encouraging continued participation by new members. For new members and first-time APPA conference attendees who are wondering how best to benefit from joining APPA, Strazdas would say, "Welcome to a unique association that you will find engaging, involving, and community-oriented. You are wanted. It is safe here, and we want you to keep coming back."

#### LIFE OUTSIDE THE CAMPUS

Thanks to those family genes of service, Strazdas went another step farther and became involved in local government. Initially, he got involved with volunteer activities in the planning commission for Portage, a sister city to Kalamazoo. That led, 14 years ago, to being encouraged to run for city council and then, 10 years ago, for mayor. He now has served for five terms and is running again for another two-year term. His reason is similar to the foundation of his work for WMU and APPA: "I feel an obligation to help my city improve."

Serving as mayor has given Strazdas an opportunity to exercise his leadership skills, which he expects will enhance his role as APPA President. In fact, "there are a lot of synergistic aspects to being the leader of a city

and of a department of facilities," he says.

In addition to his full plate at work and in his community, Strazdas has also enjoyed a full family life. His three children are now grown, but "I spent every spare moment watching them grow up," he recalls. "I hardly ever missed a game—they were all very involved in sports." His own sports interest is golf; he tries to get in a round of golf one day a week in the summertime. Pete is married to Sharon, who has been by his side during his APPA journey.

#### PREPARE TO BE ENGAGED

A big part of the APPA strategic plan under Strazdas will be "onboarding" new members as effectively as possible, he says.



Landscape crew on a snow closure day (January 2014—14" snowfall).

not to try to do things alone but by collaborating more with other groups. Engagement just screams as where we need to go as an association."

Strazdas sees engagement as "understanding and anticipating what our members need" and moving to fulfill those needs, perhaps even before they are clear to the membership. "My philosophy as a leader is to skate where the puck is going to be; that is, where our profession is going," he says. "I don't want to sell membership or products—those sell themselves. I want to create relationships by finding connection points."

For Strazdas, that means personalizing and enhancing APPA's ongoing commitment to its strategic plan. "We're all connected




PHOTO BY RHONDA HOLE

Pete and Bob Andrews of California State University East Bay.

According to Lander Medlin, APPA's executive vice president, the concept of onboarding is to "create a welcoming community that is personalized for each new APPA member, and to treat the new member as a member first and a customer second." Says

Strazdas, "We will, in essence, be partnering and mentoring with individuals as a relationship focus, and expanding services for new members."

Although Strazdas sees APPA's offerings in areas like building information modeling (BIM) as "way ahead of the curve with technology" and believes its educational resources are unparalleled, he would like to see the association offer yet more technology to its members. He envisions providing a massive open online course (MOOC), for instance, as well as experiential learning opportunities. "That is a huge thing you will hear about in my term," he promises. He anticipates finding and focusing on common denominators among members and their institutions, emphasizing the value of existing APPA programs and services, and relaying his passion for involvement to staff and membership alike.

APPA members can expect to be called upon for a higher level of involvement than ever before with Strazdas as President, because, as he says, "I'm incredibly passionate about anything I do—I give more than 100 percent!" 

Rochester, NY-based Ruth Thaler-Carter ([www.writerruth.com](http://www.writerruth.com)) is a regular contributor to APPA publications.



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