

Change and Opportunity

Meet the new BCCA president
BY CHERYL MAH

When the British Columbia Construction Association (BCCA) president Manley McLachlan announced his intentions to retire, the board of directors didn't have to look very far for his successor.

Chris Atchison, who joined BCCA in 2015, threw his hat into the ring of potential candidates and was successfully named incoming president.

"When the position became available, I felt it was the right next step for me and an opportunity to contribute back to this province and the workforce that I deeply care about," says Atchison, who served as provincial manager of the Skilled Trades Employment Program (STEP).

McLachlan was at the helm of the association for 13 years and under his leadership, BCCA has developed many important provincial programs and services. Atchison is well aware that he has some big shoes to fill.

"Manley has been an outstanding leader of the association for more than a decade. I am fortunate that he will stay on in an advisory capacity to me until the end of March to facilitate the transition and introductions to the people I need to get to know," he says.

Since Atchison officially assumed his position in January 2017, he has been on a whirlwind "meet-and-greet" tour around the province to get to know members, industry stakeholders and regional association leadership teams.

Headquartered in Victoria, BCCA is an employer-based construction association that is comprised of the four regional associations in the province: Vancouver Regional Construction Association, Vancouver Island Construction Association, Southern Interior Construction Association and Northern Regional Construction Association. It represents more than 2,000 businesses active in the industrial, commercial, institutional and multi-family residential sectors.

"Right now I'm firing on all cylinders to make sure I meet everyone that I need to while also taking time to meet with my internal staff," adds Atchison, who oversees a team of about 15. "This is a tremendous organization and I want to continue the good work that has been done."

Atchison brings 20 years of association management experience to the position with an extensive background in employment and labour market programs. But it was a serendipitous path that got him into the association management business.

Born in Prince Rupert, Atchison grew up in a family with roots in the commercial fishing industry. He worked as a commercial fisherman in his late teens and early 20s which helped to



pay for university. After graduating from the University of B.C. with a Bachelor's degree in international relations, he and his wife moved to Victoria where he worked for a couple of different organizations involved in training and workforce programs.

Then in 1998, he joined ASPECT (The Association of Service Providers for Employability and Career Training) as provincial contractor manager before eventually becoming chief operating officer in 2004.

"The big emphasis within that organization is on workforce development and strategies to help people to find meaningful work and keep meaningful work," says Atchison. "I had a wonderful board there but after 17 years, it was time to make a change and move onto the next chapter of my life."

And that change came in the form of an opportunity to join BCCA as provincial manager of STEP. Created in 2006, the program focuses on finding trained and ready-to-work candidates for construction employers with jobs to fill. STEP's programs have placed more than 10,000 British Columbians into skilled trades jobs.

"I was well aware of the STEP program — a long serving program for meeting the needs of British Columbians in a sector that is so vital to the economy... so I embraced the opportunity to work with the outstanding team at BCCA," he says.

Atchison takes over as president at an interesting time in the construction industry when three of the regional construction associations have also undergone leadership transitions. Rosalind Thorn (BCCA North) retired in 2015 and this year, Greg Baynton (VICA) and William Everitt (SICA) will also be leaving their positions.

"It's a changing of the guard but those strong leaders have all surrounded themselves with good people and boards to pass along the knowledge and to continue the good work," says Atchison. "I look forward to working with their successors. Change brings new energy, new ideas... that will help us serve the industry and make it as strong as it can be."

Working with the regional construction associations to ensure strong benefits to membership and productive collaborations across the province is a primary goal. "We need to work in harmony for the best interest of the construction sector and as the overarching voice for the industry, we need to be reflective and respectful of all of our members and regions," he says.

Other focuses include advocacy, promoting construction as a career, safety and procurement practices.

"I want to make sure that the processes in procurement continue to be open, fair and transparent," says Atchison, noting expansion of the procurement platform BidCentral will remain a priority.

The B.C. built technology has been in operation since 2009 and is now the largest online construction marketplace in the province.

"We see BidCentral as the platform of choice for the future of the industry," says Atchison. "It is an innovative tool for the way business can and should be done in the sector. I'm very excited about continuing the service and it gives me encouragement about the future of procurement and best practices in bidding."

An aging workforce (two thirds of B.C.'s construction workforce is over the age of 45) will require continued aggressive recruitment

of people into the industry. The demographic trends and a projected increase in construction activity are forecast to create a 15,000 worker shortfall by 2025.

“We need to continue to cultivate ways to encourage youth to consider the industry as a career of choice...to be inclusive to groups that are currently under represented including our indigenous populations and new Canadians,” he says.

Attracting women to the trades is also key and the industry has been doing a good job at it, continues Atchison, but more needs to be done to “keep them advancing their careers in the trades and for women to really find a home in construction.”

Some good news is that BCCA’s latest workforce survey shows that high school graduates entering construction trades training programs within one year of graduation is improving. When the BCCA first began calculating this number in 2013 it estimated that 1 in 93 students went from Grade 12 into trades training. In 2016 that number has improved by 35 per cent to 1 in 69. While this is a positive trend, much more needs to be done to address the looming labour shortage.

“In order to meet the most conservative labour shortage projections in this sector, we’re going to need that number down to less than 1 in 10. We have some work ahead of us on this challenge,” notes Atchison.



As for the outlook for construction, Atchison does not anticipate any slowdown with public infrastructure investments, in particular, continuing to drive work and optimism in the province.

“Residential and commercial remain robust in the Lower Mainland and on Vancouver Island and I’m still positive about potential LNG final investments,” he says.

Outside of work, Atchison actively contributes to his community. He is chairman of the

Sandra Schmirler Foundation, a national charity that has raised millions for newborn intensive care units. He is also president of the Victoria Minor Hockey Association and the head coach of the South Island Royals.

“I have a real passion for coaching hockey and being a positive influence. I see many crossovers in the development of youth through sport and team play that prepares them for success in the workforce,” says Atchison, who has a son and daughter both playing hockey. **CB**

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