

Building a Public/Private Partnership

The Process of Creating a Successful Relationship Between an AIA Chapter and a City Government

AIA chapters bring tremendous value to their members: professional membership, knowledge sharing, communications, public relations, and social and professional connections. Perhaps the most influential – and exciting – role that chapters can fulfill is advocacy with the public sector. By building a strong relationship with local government and making themselves an indispensable part of the public sector’s decision making process, AIA chapters have the opportunity to profoundly change the shape of their communities. Architects, with their unique training and expertise, can contribute to the public discourse their well-rounded perspectives on design, land use, development, economics, social studies, transportation, urban planning, and the environment. When architects fully engage and contribute that knowledge and expertise through advocacy in the civic realm, it has the potential to make them – and their chapters – relevant and influential parts of the political and decision making process.

Most AIA members would agree that representation and participation, whether before local government, the state capital, or in Washington, is one of the most important functions provided by any professional organization. While governmental relations is one of the five areas required as a basic service by all chapters of the AIA, it can be somewhat daunting for those who have never done it before, or those with little experience. How to begin?

The purpose of this whitepaper is to document a long-term, strategically planned, governmental relations effort at the AIA Central Valley Chapter in Sacramento, California, as a case study for those chapters who wish to build similar advocacy programs of their own. Only ten years ago, AIACV was a relatively quiet chapter known for hosting continuing education programs and traditional social programs. The chapter met its members’ needs, however, it had little to no connection with local government in an advocacy sense. In the past ten years, however, the Chapter carefully built a very strong relationship with the City of Sacramento, both in the design and construction arena as well as the realm of general planning, giving the Chapter an opportunity to become much more relevant in a broader community context. An added benefit of this new relevance is that the Chapter now has wider acceptance in the architectural community, and has engaged new and existing members and leaders, which has made the Chapter much stronger and healthier as a result.

This whitepaper describes the six-step process used by the AIACV Chapter as it built a relationship with the City of Sacramento.

1. **Building a Relationship with the City:** Intention (making the decision to get involved)
2. **Member-by-Member Action and Involvement** (getting the first members involved)
3. **AIA Action and Involvement** (Chapter-sponsored involvement)
4. **Taking it a Step Further:** Becoming Advisors to the City Leaders (how members and the Chapter became advisors to City leaders)
5. **The City’s Response:** Cooperation, Collaboration, and Mutual Respect (how the City made sweeping changes as a result of the Chapter’s action)
6. **Bringing it All Together:** Creating a Lasting Relationship Between Government and the Chapter and Making a Difference in the Community

Six Steps To Building a Better Relationship with a City Government: How the AIACV Built a Robust and Effective Partnership with the City of Sacramento



Background: The AIA Central Valley is an 850-member chapter that covers a broad geographical area. Although the majority of the Chapter's members live in the Greater Sacramento area, its borders reach far beyond the city's limits, encompassing 17 counties. Its members practice varying types of architecture in a growing economy; the Central Valley area has been prospering fairly well for the past 10-15 years (until a recent downturn) and, as a result, the profession and the Chapter's membership have grown at a modest rate. As the state capital, Sacramento is known as a government town, and the state AIA chapter, the AIA California Council, has developed a close relationship with statewide elected officials and agencies. As the "local" chapter, however, the AIACV had not historically had a strong relationship with its counterparts in the City government – that is, until nine years ago. Before that time, the Chapter was typical of most AIA chapters. It served its members very well with continuing education programs and social opportunities, but it extended itself only in a minor way to the outside community.

An alignment of circumstances at the Chapter and in the City led the sparks for change:

- Poor conditions in the City's development processing area led to a public outcry by developers, and one in particular very publicly promised to stop working with the City altogether;
- A desire by architects already involved in the civic realm to tackle those processing problems directly;
- Regional planning and strategic population planning efforts came to the forefront of the public agenda;
- A desire by architects to change the shape of the Sacramento area by becoming involved in the regional planning process;
- The longtime Chapter executive began making plans to retire, allowing for the possibility of a new executive with advocacy and public relations experience.

While some of the architects who became part of the above activities were already Chapter leaders, some were not, and were recruited by the chapter later. Chapter leaders were excited about the possibilities for change and began to carve out a long-range plan for action. It was a membership in transition, and this confluence of events was supported by a new attitude at the Chapter: ***let's get involved.***

As a result of this new attitude and involvement, AIA members began to receive appointments to key City committees, including the Mayor's Development Oversight Commission in 1999, charged with making recommendations to improve the overly complex and mismanaged building and design departments. For the profession, member participation on the DOC represented the first outreach efforts by AIA members to the City of Sacramento. Instead of representing *themselves* on boards and commissions, members began representing the *Chapter*, and the Chapter began developing its own identity as an advocacy-based organization. Since that time, a cultural transformation has occurred both at the City of Sacramento and at the AIA Central Valley Chapter, and it is safe to say that one could not have happened without the other.

First, the AIACV Chapter has gone through a metamorphosis in character, changing from a quiet, inconspicuous society to a dynamic, vibrant, and very *connected* organization. The Chapter made a strategic decision to become an *advocacy-driven* organization, shifting its focus externally rather than internally. Its members and the Chapter's executive director have become focused, involved participants in City government. Through this concerted, longtime effort, Chapter members have developed relationships with City leaders that have made them invaluable advisors and sought-after contributors to the public policy process.

Second, the City's building and design operations have gone through their own transformation to become an organization that is more efficient, customer-focused, and business friendly. Since the DOC recommendations, the City's design departments have been reorganized, and the architectural profession has been at the forefront of those changes. A new City Manager was hired who is very connected to the design and construction industry. The Building Department created a team approach with customer service and efficiency as its core mission; plan check times have been exponentially reduced, and a culture of innovation has been established as the norm. AIA architects have been involved partners with the City every step of the way.

During this process, Chapter members have worked diligently to develop relationships with City leaders, managers, and staff members. As a result of these efforts, the following fundamental changes have occurred:

- AIA architects are now sought after by the mayor and City council members as experts on planning and design issues;
- AIA architects are members and leaders of several key City boards and commissions;
- AIA architects are advisors on key hires in the City's planning and design agencies;
- An AIA architect is the City's chief building official for the first time in history;
- *Sacramento Magazine* recently named several AIA architects – including the Chapter president – to its "most influential individuals" list (a first for Sacramento); and
- The Building Department was recently named the **best** in the area by the local *Business Journal*, after being named the worst just a short time ago.



Step One Building a Relationship with the City: Intention

The first element of a successful governmental relations program is to establish an overall objective: what goal does the organization want to achieve? In the late 1990s, the members of the AIA Central Valley Chapter determined their objective was to become an organization that was **relevant** in shaping the future of the City of Sacramento on the broadest level possible. They created a new definition of success for the organization – to go beyond the Chapter's traditional role as a social connection and a provider of continuing education and events, to having a direct role in the day-to-day processes that shape the planning and development of the built environment in the community.

To be more effective as a chapter required the organization to begin to direct its efforts *outward* beyond the immediate membership, and it required activity and advocacy which was not universally supported by its diverse membership. This was a new role for the Chapter, and was somewhat controversial in the beginning. Two factors were at the root of these concerns:

1. Concerns about change, which softened when the benefits of the change became apparent;
2. Concerns about taking positions that could alienate members or community leaders; these all but evaporated when members realized the positions were not politically-based "we/they" ideological stances, but perspectives based on core principles, such as:
 - The benefits of **streamlined processing** – which does not mean rubber-stamping projects, it means getting to yes, or no, in as timely and efficient a manner as possible;
 - The importance of **thoughtful design** – distilled into the new Chapter theme, "Design Matters";
 - The importance of **transparency** – the rules are on the table for everyone to see, and everyone plays by the same rules; **communication** – when there is a problem we talk about it and try to sort it out; and **collaboration** – very little is accomplished when we work in isolation.

Although there were pockets of discontent, very few members were not supportive of this new, more active role for the Chapter. In fact, ultimately the invigorated level of activity brought many new members to the organization and a level of energy and enthusiasm unparalleled in the Chapter's history.

Finally, it is important to note that members made it a practice to use the AIA identity in an effort to "brand" their participation on behalf of the Chapter. From the beginning, the Chapter insisted that the AIA initials follow members' names on rosters, in listings, and on all other communications. This branded the members' individual activities as being part of a coordinated effort by the Chapter.



Step Two

Member-by-Member Action and Involvement

City governments operate on two levels: a political/policy making level of elected officials, and an administrative level where most of the day-to-day work is accomplished that defines and shapes a city. An effective private/public partnership must connect with the city at both levels. Often, architects who are comfortable in the administrative realm are less comfortable in the political realm, and visa versa. The AIACV Chapter enlisted the support and action of individual members who had interest in both areas, and whose work proceeded simultaneously. To maintain the Chapter's independence, objectivity, and ability to bridge between competing interests, the Chapter has attempted to keep actions of individual members related to political races clearly separate from Chapter-level activity on boards, commissions, and planning initiatives.

The shift in the focus and activity of AIACV members began to occur in 1999. Although a small number of members had been politically connected prior to this time, attending fund raisers and serving on boards and commissions, a more concerted, coordinated effort on behalf of the Chapter began to emerge. With the AIACV brand attached to these efforts, these members became a part of a new level of visibility, and reinforced the architectural community as key players in shaping the policy environment of the City of Sacramento. As Chapter members volunteered more of their time, expertise, and opinions for City projects, activities, and boards, they became more familiar to City staff, managers, and leaders, and gradually the opportunities for the profession expanded. This all tied in to the Chapter's new objective of becoming more relevant in shaping the City's future on the broadest possible level.

The Political Realm

- **Attendance at Political Functions.** Individual members began to attend – and host – political events and fundraisers, developing greater connections with the political and development community; in the beginning (late 1990s), only a small number of architects attended these functions; later, attendance grew as others began to see their value;
- **Participation in Community/Business Outreach.** Individual members also began to participate in existing community/business outreach efforts, such as becoming members of the Sacramento Metro Chamber, or accompanying local politicians on study missions and trips (such as a study mission to Portland, Oregon, and the annual “cap to cap” trip to Washington, DC);
- **Lobbying on Local Policy Makers.** Individual members lobbied political policy makers on areas of common interest, such as the establishment of a “Development Oversight Commission” by the Mayor, with a broad purview over development processing; this commission ultimately became a major powerhouse commission that was responsible for the overhaul of the design and planning arms of City government;
- **Weighing in on Key Issues.** Members who worked comfortably in the political realm were encouraged by the chapter to call their elected leaders and weigh in on key issues of importance to the design and construction industry.

Administrative Realm

- **Applications for Key Board Positions.** Members applied for openings on key City boards and commissions, such as the planning commission, or the design and preservation board;
- **Invitations for Key Positions.** Because of their groundwork in the political realm and becoming more “known,” members were invited to apply for positions on the Mayor's new Development Oversight Commission, and help to initiate the reorganization efforts of the City's design and planning departments;

- **Support for Members Pursuing Key Positions.** Members and the chapter itself supported AIACV members in pursuing participation on committees by writing letters and making calls;
- **Pursuit of Leadership Positions.** When members were successful in getting appointed, they stepped up to be leaders on the development-related commissions, serving as chair, launching initiatives, and serving on key committees.

Through these efforts, members developed increasingly enhanced relationships with City government leaders, developers, political leaders, other key players in the community. They used the AIA brand as a thread that unified their efforts, and capitalized on architects' strengths as being good listeners, problem solvers, and their ability to juggle many competing interests and views to find common ground. They developed a reputation as being facilitators, leaders, and action-oriented participants.



Step Three AIA Action and Involvement

In the early 2000s, a shift in attitude about advocacy began to occur at the Chapter itself. In 2002, a new executive was retained who had interest and experience in public affairs. The new ED worked closely with the Chapter president on an outreach strategic plan. Both recognized the importance of communications and having a presence in local governmental affairs. They also recognized the importance of AIACV members using the AIA initials – AIA “branding” – whenever they participated in outreach affairs. The Chapter leadership saw that with an increasing number of members participating at a high level in both the political and administrative arenas, the Chapter could also develop partnerships at the organizational level. Key Chapter activities included:

- **Chapter Participation in Local Government Events.** The Chapter began to get involved by supporting local government planning efforts such as the SACOG Blueprint (Sacramento Area Council of Governments) and the General Plan Update for the City of Sacramento, by encouraging members to participate in workshops and hosting Chapter events that introduced members to the process;
- **Chapter Invitations to Participate in Civic Events.** After contributing to the local planning efforts, Chapter leaders began to receive invitations to participate at City meetings, boards, and so on, and they did so;
- **Chapter Positions on Key City Issues.** The Chapter followed up by taking positions on broad City issues – writing position letters and making phone calls when key policies were in formation; examples include the proposed split of the City's design and preservation board into two separate boards;
- **Encourage Member Activism.** Chapter leaders also encouraged members to make calls or write letters on their own to support, or not support, particular issues, encouraging architects to get involved and make their voice heard in the political process;

- **Stay with Basic Principles of Good Urban Design.** The Chapter determined it WOULD NOT officially endorse individual politicians, as that would potentially be divisive and undermine the collaborative foundations being laid. Chapter positions were based in basic principals of good urban design, such as smart growth, transit-oriented development, process streamlining, and design quality.
- **Develop a Motto.** The chapter developed a motto, "Design Matters," which was adopted by the Mayor and other City leaders;
- **Form Working Partnerships with Other Organizations.** The Chapter formed narrow and focused partnership relationships with other organizations, which has allowed formerly divisive entities to work together on areas where goals and visions overlap, while avoiding blanket endorsements. Examples:
 - Smart Growth Leadership Awards, in partnership with the Environmental Council of Sacramento, an organization that is controversial to many architects due to its history of litigation and confrontation. In a carefully crafted and vetted policy, the Chapter was able to join forces to create this highly successful program which has been used by many developers as a marketing tool to highlight the environmentally conscious aspects of quality infill development;
 - The Chapter made a formal endorsement of the SACOG Blueprint process and conclusions – developing an ongoing relationship with the Sacramento Area Council of Governments which launched this innovative and highly lauded initiative;
 - Sponsored programs with other organizations, e.g., co-sponsored the Codes Conversation Program with the Development Oversight Commission; endorsed the City's new innovative Matrix team approach plan review process; sponsored and staffed a booth at the ECOS Earth day;
 - The Chapter hosted workshop meetings with key organizations to set strategy for private sector initiatives and streamline regulatory reform, including the Urban Land Institute, Sacramento Metro Chamber, Sacramento Builders' Exchange, and others.
- **Encourage Connections with Political Leaders.** The Chapter encouraged connections with politically important City leaders to build relationships by inviting them to Chapter events, hosting receptions, and recognizing their work. Examples: hosting a "meet and greet" reception for the new City Manager from Portland, Oregon; participating on a task force that worked with the City to design the new building/planning permit facilities; providing a tour of the new City building department facility as a Chapter event; and receptions for the Mayor;
- **Improve Exchange to AIA for Key Civic Leaders.** The initiation of "President's Memberships," no-cost memberships for key City and regional officials, awarded by the AIACV president. Examples include the City Development Services Director, prominent and quality developers (railyards, affordable housing, and market rate downtown condos), and journalists (Board chair of the local prominent business magazine).

Finally, two notes about the work of chapter executives:

- The Chapter must decide as a group to focus its efforts on public affairs; when the new Chapter executive was hired, there was already a huge commitment by the Chapter to produce continuing education events. The new chapter executive spent her first year on the job completing those commitments. After that time, the Board of Directors decided to reduce the number of CE events so that she could focus more time and attention on advocacy efforts.
- It is desirable to retain a chapter executive with some experience or, at the very least, a desire to learn, about advocacy work. The chapter executive is the public face of the Chapter in many respects, and can help to create the culture of external communication that is needed to work with outside organizations and help champion causes that are important to the members.

Step Four. Taking it a Step Further: Becoming Advisors to City Leaders

As a result of the work accomplished by the architects participating in the activities described above, the Chapter and key members became valued advisors for City leaders on many levels. This has had many untold benefits for members and the Chapter alike.

- Advisors to the Mayor and city council on design and planning issues;
- Advisors to and participants in interviews for key development processing departments on major hiring decisions;
- Advisors to the City Manager on design and planning issues.

Step Five. The City's Response: Cooperation, Collaboration, and Mutual Respect

In the late 1990s, the City of Sacramento had a reputation as one of the worst places in Northern California to do business with the design and construction industry. One of the biggest developers in the area swore he would never build in Sacramento again because the permitting process was so cumbersome and the City's building official was so anti-business. Embarrassed by this public disgrace and concerned about losing the economic prosperity the developer and others represented to the City, the Mayor created the Development Oversight Commission in an effort to remedy the situation. With two architect members of the AIA Central Valley among its membership, the DOC made 33 major recommendations to overhaul of the City's planning and design process – and one of the recommendations was that the DOC continue as a permanent oversight commission.

Prior to this time, the City of Sacramento's building and design departments were known as overly complex, labyrinth-like, dysfunctional organizations. Customers were required to visit every office, sometimes several times, in a long and frustrating process. All decisions were made by staff, and customer needs were not a priority. Because of the recommendations of the DOC, the City created new models of operation (the "Matrix" system) that helped build a "culture of innovation" for not only the building and design departments, but other City departments as well. Other significant changes in the City included:

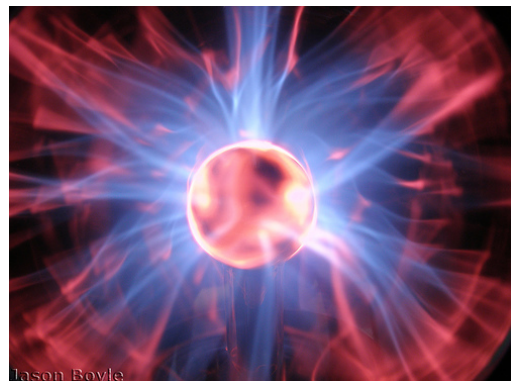
- Focusing on the new theme, "Design Matters," the City hired Ray Kerridge away from Portland, Oregon, to serve as Development Services Director. Kerridge was known as an enthusiastic urban and community planning advocate. He brought Bill Thomas with him from Portland, a like-minded colleague who served as a key administrator. Within a year, Kerridge was promoted to the position of City Manager, and Thomas took his place as Development Services Director. As the Chapter had been cultivating a relationship with Kerridge and Thomas since they were hired, they now had the advantage of having a close relationship with the new City Manager, and another friendly face as the head of the Development Services department;
- When the position of Chief Building Official became open, Chapter members actively recruited an AIA architect to pursue the role. As a result, Sacramento now has an architect (who happens to be an AIACV board member) in this traditionally engineering role for the first time in the City's 150-year history;
- Since Kerridge and Thomas came to Sacramento, and based on the recommendations of the DOC, the Development Services department has been transformed to break down "silos" that separated the departments involved in development processing. A new department was created, bringing all related components together in a team approach: planning, building, public works, fire, utilities, trees, etc. The result is that processing has become more transparent, effective, and efficient, with a focus on customer service, certainty, timeliness, and open communication. Plan check times have been reduced exponentially, and the new customer-service goal for the review process is "Get the Customer to Success." The traditional chest-high "counter" that symbolized the "dichotomy" of the design community and the City's development processors was removed and replaced by one-on-one customer service desks. A new era was created;

- A new position for the City was created entitled, “Urban Design Manager,” and the chapter was invited to participate in the position definition as well as the position interviews. As a result, the City hired an AIACV member architect with broad purview over formerly isolated areas such as design review and preservation.



Step Six. Bringing it All Together: Creating a Lasting Relationship Between Government and the Chapter and Making a Difference in the Community

- The Chapter built a new office in midtown Sacramento with the intent of making external relations a priority. The Chapter determined that its “public face” was critical to continuing in the role of being key players at all levels in the community;
- The Chapter now hosts events that connect with the community at all levels;
- A gallery open to the public during “Second Saturday” art walks which showcases members’ contribution and visions in shaping the built environment; focus meetings and workshops bring the AIACV in partnering roles with other key organizations and the governments;
- Building continuity – continued participation on the DOC, planning commission, design commission, and preservation commission, among others. The Chapter strives to ensure that as AIACV architect members are termed out, they actively recruit to find replacement who are also AIACV architect members;
- Regional impact: the AIACV’s Code Conversation Program, founded by a member who served concurrently on both the DOC and the Chapter’s board, brings together Building Officials from jurisdictions all over the region, resulting in increased regulatory and interpretation coordination, and a sense that we are all in this together, building a safe and beautiful place to live, work, and enjoy. This has fostered unprecedented regional cooperation and coordination in code interpretation and processing of development applications;
- All this activity has brought considerable new blood to the Chapter – continued involvement with external relations has sparked interest by members in the Chapter and brought along new leadership.



Summary

For an AIA chapter to become effective at advocacy, a personality change is required of the chapter: it is no longer possible to maintain the status quo of awards programs, continuing education, and social get-togethers. It takes a multi-year commitment of chapter leadership and the support of the chapter executive to make a serious, sustained change to engender the kind of results that will make a difference in a community. The membership and staff must have a shared vision and dedication that will cross the boundaries of one-year presidential themes and endure, year after year. This process will raise expectations and produce a character change that will make the chapter healthier and energize members. It will draw in new members and leaders, invigorate those who have been with the chapter already, and, most importantly, bring members closer to their community and civic leaders. It is not an easy process, but the end results are helping reshape the City of Sacramento and reduce government bureaucracy. All of which is ultimately good for architects, their clients, and the community.

Key People

Over the decade of this program's existence, dozens of individuals invested considerable time and energy in various roles to this endeavor. This list is meant to highlight just a few by way of example:

Phyllis Newton, Esq., Executive Director from 2002 through 2007.

Phyllis is an attorney with expertise in the legal aspects of architectural practice, as well as considerable interest in the planning, entitlement processes, and the principles of smart growth and urban design. She was a member of the City of Sacramento's General Plan Advisory Committee from 2004-08; Chair of the City's Community/Urban Design, Preservation, Cultural Resources, Community Outreach/Involvement Subcommittee from 2004-08; and Secretary and General Counsel of the Urban Design Alliance-Sacramento from 2006-07. Current appointments include the City's Downtown Urban Design Steering Committee in 2006; the California Architects Board Regulatory & Enforcement Committee in 2006; and the City's Design Commission in 2008.

Nick Docous, AIA was Chapter president during the first full year of Phyllis Newton's term and supported the core philosophy of an actively engaged AIACV. He served on the Board of Directors from 1998-2000, and was elected Treasurer in 2001, Vice President in 2002, and President in 2003. He went on to become a member of the Board of Directors for the AIA California Council from 2003-04 and was Vice President of Communications and Public Affairs from 2007-08. He is currently First Vice President/President-Elect of the AIACC. He is also active with the Sacramento Regional Conservation Corps since 2004, currently serving as Vice President since 2007. Mr. Docous is a principal with Lionakis.

Bob Chase, AIA took the reigns of the permitting process in 2006 as Sacramento's first architect Chief Building Official in its 150-year history, after serving as principal of one of the largest Sacramento area architectural firms. Mr. Chase played a key role in the implementation of continuing the reform process begun by his predecessors and placed new emphasis on green and sustainable building, customer service, and cooperative partnering between the design and regulatory constituencies. Mr. Chase also served as a Board member of the AIACV from 2008 to present. He was named one of Sacramento's most influential people by *Sacramento Magazine* in 2008. He also served as a member of the Capital Area Development Authority from 2002-05; the City's Design Review and Preservation Board from 2002-05 (he was Chair from 2004-05); and the Capitol Mall Design Competition Steering Committee from 2005 to present.

Michael F. Malinowski, AIA was appointed in 1996 as the only architect member of a newly formed Building Department Customer Advisory panel, and went on to serve as the only architect member of the Mayor's Commission on Development from 1997 to 1999, followed by six years of service on the Development Oversight Commission culminating as chair. While serving on the DOC, Mr. Malinowski was concurrently serving on the Board of the AIACV, and then went on to serve the AIACV as President in 2008. During his term as chapter president, Mr. Malinowski launched a number of initiatives that continued the work outlined in this whitepaper, such as a Design Review Task Force, a Regional Forum which brought together diverse interests such as the Chamber of Commerce, Building Industry Association, Development Oversight Commission, Sacramento Area Council of Governments, Urban Land Institute, and other entities and individuals concerned with regional issues to foster research and presentation on leadership best practices. Mr. Malinowski founded the Code Conversation Program in 2003 as a joint endeavor between the DOC and AIACV, which continues today. He was named one of Sacramento's most influential people by *Sacramento Magazine* in 2008, and presently serves the AIA California Council as Vice President of Communication and Public Affairs.

Bruce Starkweather, FAIA has been an active AIA leader for more than 20 years, and was instrumental in sparking the political realm activities of the AIACV through his participation in fundraising and other political activities, as well as his involvement with community/business organizations such as the Sacramento Metro Chamber. His interest in governmental relations grew from his experience as Vice President of Governmental Relations for the AIA California Council in the mid-1990s. He was a member of the AIA Central Valley Board of Directors in 1987-92, and was elected chapter President in 1992. He was a member of the AIA California Council Board of Directors from 1990-95, and was Vice President of Governmental Relations from 1994-95. Mr. Starkweather began his formal involvement with the City as a member of the Development Oversight Commission in 2001 and was an active member until 2008. He served as chair in 2005. He was Vice Chair of the City's General Plan Advisory Committee from 2004-08.



March 2009