

Construction Conversations

Episode 1 – A Conversation With Les Snyder, EVP at Brightline West

Hosted by Dirk Haire of Fox Rothschild LLP and Brian Perlberg of AGC and ConsensusDocs

Haire: Hello, this is [Dirk Haire](#). I'm a partner in the Fox Rothschild Washington, DC office and Co-Chair of the national Construction Practice Group. This is the first of a series of construction conversations with industry leaders that I'm going to be co-hosting with [Brian Perlberg](#). Brian is head of [AGC](#)'s contract documents and [ConsensusDocs](#) programs.

This series came about from a few conversations over the last few months that Brian and I have been having about trying to bring some new and innovative content to the construction industry generally, but also to highlight AGC and its efforts in leadership and the contract documents program and the ConsensusDocs that are produced by the team of volunteers at AGC.

In this series of podcasts, we're going to talk with industry leaders about their professional careers, their personal lives and their AGC involvement.

To get us going on this first edition, we have with us today, I'm very excited to say, Les Snyder. Les is a long-time construction industry leader. He's currently leading the Brightline West high-speed train program in Las Vegas, the sister project to the Brightline project in the Miami to Orlando line, a very exciting project that we're going to talk about today. Les is also currently the senior vice president of national AGC and will become AGC's national president next March at the convention.

We're very excited to have Les with us today. Why don't you tell us a about where you were born?

Snyder: Thanks, Dirk. I was actually born in a very small town called Donaldsonville, Louisiana, right on the banks of the Mississippi River. It happened to be the second project where my father served as superintendent on a major marine project after he got out of engineering school

Haire: That's great. I know you've spent a great deal of your growing up years in Pittsburgh. Maybe you can give us some background on growing up in Pittsburgh. I assume you're probably a Steelers fan.

Snyder: Of course! Once a Steelers fan, always a Steelers fan, Dirk, you know that. In a tough division against your Ravens. Dirk and I always hear some robust conversation during football season.

But yes, I did grow up in Pittsburgh, and a large amount of that was my father's company Dravo Corporation's headquarters are there. We eventually moved back there. I can distinctly remember at that time, in first going to Pittsburgh, coming out of the tunnel through the bridge -- City of Bridges, as everybody knows Pittsburgh -- but still looking down the river and seeing the steel mills with the coke gases being burned off. It was quite a sight.

All of that is gone today. Any of you who have been to Pittsburgh would recognize it as a very upscale and innovative town, respective of its environmental situation. All of that has gone and just fabulous river edge facilities exist, entertainment, venues and all of that, including the Steelers' stadium.

Haire: Yes, that is the site of some pain for me as a Ravens fan and Brian as well, who's my fellow Ravens fan.

Perlberg: I go to the Pittsburgh stadium and watch the Ravens with a strip stack of Joe Flacco, lose a playoff game in Pittsburgh. But I got to say, I think the Ravens are looking pretty good this year. When they visit Pittsburgh, I think Les, you might be disappointed by the results this year.

Snyder: Without conceding that, the Steelers have a rebuilding duration coming up, especially with Ben retiring. So, let's see.

Haire: We've all got the fall we'll look forward to.

So, Les, why don't you share with us how, and when you became interested in construction as a career?

Snyder: I alluded to this in my intro questions there, but I'm actually third generation of being in the construction business. My grandfather, after World War I, he was a draftsman for J&L Steel and rose through the ranks to be a senior executive with J&L Steel, designing the different members and reinforcing steel.

He basically got to know every contractor on the East Coast. I actually found a picture of him with a hat from the 1950s, from a 1950 Moles' clambake. My father was a graduate civil engineer, actually, from my alma mater as well, University of Pittsburgh, and went on to work his way through the businesses, as a superintendent and project manager, a specialist in marine construction. As I tell most people, I just never knew what else to do.

Haire: That's great. I know your civil engineering degree, it came from the University of Pittsburgh. So, once you graduated from Pitt, what was your first job?

Snyder: I started as a project engineer, pre-construction, at a company by the name of Dick Corporation, which focused on graduates from the University of Pittsburgh. Interestingly enough, because it took my father 14 years to get his degree due to two tours in Europe, in World War II and a tour of duty in Korea, he actually graduated the same time as the then-president of Dick Corporation. Since I'm the third, I was well-known and it wasn't any doubt after many other job offers, that I needed to go work in the family at Dick Corporation.

Haire: No, it's awesome. Maybe you can share with us then, your career progression after you got your first started at the Dick Corporation.

Snyder: That's a great question, and it causes me a lot of thought. I've been so blessed to have been exposed to about every facet of our industry through and over many geographies between the U.S.,

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Canada, Mexico and the Caribbean. I believe that much of my progression came through the old adage, throw them into the deep end and see if he can swim. I'm still on the top of the surface.

At work, that first position, we traveled all over the country proposing and bidding on major projects. I can remember their expansion to LAX for the 1984 Olympics. It was such a wonderful opportunity to view the tremendous opportunities in the construction industry. I went into project management, the first a major effort there was around 1988 when I got to a troubled, 50-story high-rise project in Philadelphia.

I then was convinced to move into business development, which at that time was viewed as you took a lot of people to dinners and played a lot of golf. I just didn't think that was going to get me there, so I made up my mind to change that around and lend the operational pre-construction expertise to how to develop business and was extraordinarily successful and very proud of that.

I went on to design and build an infamous Disney project, Castaway Cay, which is truly today one of my favorite projects. I was then in the executive leadership there at American Bridge and onto Barton Mallow. I went into the business in Pittsburgh for a private equity firm and learned a tremendous amount and engaged in mergers and acquisitions.

Then, a publicly traded international parent company. And, here we are today, looking over the design and construction at Brightline West.

Haire: So, with all of that industry background, I'm curious to know: Some say today that the top three issues in construction are workforce, workforce and workforce. What's your view on the workforce issue and maybe other issues that keep you up at night?

Snyder: For certain. In every conversation amongst peers in the construction industry, workforce is a critical issue. What I would say to that for our conversation today is, I highly recommend the construction profession, everything from engineering to management to craft work, to our young people coming up.

At the core of this workforce issue for far too long, we have not addressed the negative stigmas that society has placed on the construction industry. I believe we must again, popularize the construction industry for what it truly is. We repeatedly create modes of safe transportation; vibrant buildings, where we work, live, and enjoy; and facilities that produce energy, provide clean drinking water and so much more.

We hardly take credit that the construction industry is within the top five contributors to the gross domestic products in the United States. Now we've become one of the largest users and developers of technology when a very short period ago, we were accused of lacking in that area. At the end of the day, society would be in pretty bad shape without the construction industry.

As a career, the construction industry provides all the attributes of adventure and accomplishment any young person could imagine. I think the sky's the limit for everyone. As large as it is, one of the great things is all of us help to make it feel like one big family.

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Haire: I know you mentioned you're now at Brightline West. I'm curious to know, this is one of the nation's most fascinating infrastructure projects. How's it coming? How's that development project coming?

Snyder: We're in the midst of putting together our packaging, going to financial markets they project at the end of this year or early 2023. With financial close, we'll be breaking ground by the second quarter of 2023. Looking to be in service here between Los Angeles and Las Vegas in four to five years. So, it's a very aggressive project, but it will solve so many transportation issues in an extraordinarily sustainable manner.

Our trains are all electric. They will be the first true high-speed passenger rail privately held in the United States. Our lines in Florida are faster trains and so forth, but the line from Las Vegas to Los Angeles will be on par with the trains in Europe, Taiwan and other places in the world, reaching speeds close to 200 miles per hour in some spots of the route.

Haire: Are you concerned about inflation and supply shortages, given the large size of the project in the multi-year timeline, or is that not currently a concern?

Snyder: Those are clearly concerns. We can talk about workforce material shortages, potential of future pandemics, but the strength of our organization is why we are aggressively building through a very organized pre-construction and design phase right now to head off and address all of those subjects so there are no surprises when we do break ground. It's a major effort. It's the same that much of our construction peers know about, firms we're working with. But the only way you can ever resolve or solve these issues is to get ahead of them, and that's what we're taking advantage of in this time period.

Haire: Now, I'd like to talk about your work with AGC over the years. Most recently you chaired the AGC Climate Change Task Force and was awarded the Chairman of the Year for your work. Can you tell us a little bit about the task force's work and why you think this is an important issue?

Snyder: First, let me address ... I never had an expectation of winning the Chair of the Year from my friend Bob Lanham and the board of governors. It was purely a shock, but I take that opportunity to say that this all came together with the work of many folks in AGC of America. Many of whom, when asked, dropped everything else and came to the rescue.

The fact is that we took on the topic of climate change because it's front and center to the construction industry, and it's going to be with us for the foreseeable long future. Our job that we took on was to identify how we are going to achieve some of the goals that have been set out there and bring realism around it.

Far too often, the construction industry gets accused of not paying attention to these issues, and it's exactly the opposite. AGC of America and its contracting members have long addressed sustainable practices. The fact of the matter is the determination of what we build by owners is far more of an effect on the environment than how we build. We did not let that stand in our way in what we uncovered in our first task force. We now have multiple task forces addressing specific issues. While these goals are

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set on how to become carbon neutral and zero greenhouse gas emissions, we took on the, how we're going to get there.

There's a lot of that out there. It is extraordinarily impressive. Also, many of our members have already implemented practices with very advanced technology. It's our job as a task force to get those out and AGC of America to become the library of where all our members can go to know how to solve these issues and address climate change.

Haire: In going back to the start, when did you first become involved with AGC?

Snyder: That's a great question. Early in my career, I was attending chapter meetings in the areas I worked: Pittsburgh, Chicago, Philadelphia. My first AGC of America meeting was in 1993 in -- I so well remember-- the Sagamore in Lake George, New York. My second daughter had been born months earlier, so it was a big challenge for my wife to go with me. She always reminds me of the story of doing that.

Actually, I was in awe that I was actually in meetings next to leaders of some of the country's largest and most successful construction companies. It's like going into the World Series of construction and sitting in the dugout. It was a big marker for me, and I jumped right in with both feet and started working on the committee.

Haire: How would you say AGC has helped your career in the companies you've worked for?

Snyder: There's no doubt, networking and relationships. They are vast, and truly AGC of America and its chapters provide each of us that opportunity. It's just how much you want to seize on that.

Dirk, with that question you remind me --after all, you and I met when you were part of the AGC of America staff in the late nineties. We went on to create a great friendship along with our families, a great relationship. Your daughter visits my oldest daughter in New York all the time. We could write a book on all the challenges we've worked through. I'm happy to say the vast majority have been successes.

Through AGC, I've built so many friendships like that. You can be in any part of this country and know someone's close to solve a business issue, form a joint venture or just lend the ear personally. That's the strength of AGC.

Haire: Yeah, I completely agree. It's been my great experience as well. My only regret here is that when we met, we were the youngest guys in the room.

Snyder: Yes. I'm so happy to say there's a lot more of the younger guys in the room now, to carry on the tradition.

Haire: Brian, I would like you to share a little bit about your work with contract documents and how Les and the leadership at AGC have really been important to the growth of the ConsensusDocs program.

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Perlberg: Thanks, Dirk. You might not know this, even though you worked at AGC, that our original 1918 bylaws called for the creation of fair and balanced construction contract documents. It was only through more recent history that the leadership said, "Hey, why don't we come up with a full set of documents?" Then, folks like Les and others on the AGC board were incredibly supportive of actually getting rid of AGC contract documents and throwing them in the ring and trying to have a true industry standard so we can have a better foundation to start.

That took a lot of courage because AGC had a very successful contract documents program. Les and others on the board were fully engaged on that effort and decided to take less credit and, again, to throw the hat in the ring with everybody else so owners are part of ConsensusDocs equally with AGC and have an equal voice in the creation of the contract doc.

Les, what's been your view of the role of contracts? I often say, "You can't say a general contractor without contracts." What are you seeing, or what's your view on the role of what we've been able to accomplish and what you're seeing in the marketplace?

Snyder: We're in a challenging market. We've come through COVID and, speaking of contract issues, we all know that created many. Now, we're pulling out of such a market and there's more work than resources can. The look from the construction industry on contracts is pretty focused. We're addressing many of the issues that we just never had to before, especially with workforce shortages, the potential of schedule delays, materials and shortfalls in delivery schedules.

These are critical issues that we see contractors of all sides faced with. Brian, you remind me of how we got started with ConsensusDocs, and it goes all the way back. It became a tremendous partnership when we implemented and formed the Private Industry Advisory Council, or PIAC, today being the Public and Private Industry Council.

We actually went with the owners, and they agreed. We spent hours and hours with owners who were interested in having fair and balanced agreements, many of them being with large corporations, realizing that they might actually not be able to use those agreements, but were willing. To work with us and dedicate their time to the industry to better it, which was a big initial benefit of the ConsensusDocs initiative.

Perlberg: I wanted to pick up a one thing that you mentioned before, how you and Dirk have faced challenges over the years. As a construction attorney, I'm curious... Well, I'm a construction attorney, but you're a construction executive. What's your view of using a construction attorney and what role they play? I get the sense that the stereotype is that attorneys are someone you call as a last resort, but I feel like there's a new generation using construction attorneys more collaboratively and proactively

Snyder: Well, from my side, how I've grown and evolved and been mentored in this business: Our job is to build. But, without a doubt, we're in the riskiest business that exists. Going to court and having claims is a distraction to that focus. Having a construction attorney who believes in adding to your philosophy as a solution provider, and not merely going to court all the time ... That evolves in a relationship early on and repeatedly. With that, we look forward. We look down the road at what can come and hit us and get in front of that and solve it beforehand.

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As I said, we've been through many challenges. It doesn't work every single time. There are certain customers who make it more difficult to resolve issues in an early manner. But again, this relationship, and this specific one with Fox Rothschild and Dirk and his associates, has always led us to be able to get ahead and focus on solutions before they become problems.

Haire: Thank you, Brian, for making sure that we are highlighting the good work of ConsensusDocs and the efforts.

Les, as we start to get toward the end of our time here: You mentioned your wife, Denise, and daughters, Sarah and Jenna, who I can attest have been to dozens, if not hundreds, of AGC meetings. I'd be curious to know, and I know our podcast listeners would love to know, what Sarah and Jen are doing these days. I think they're both out of college at this point.

Snyder: They are. Thank you for that because they're the pride of my life. Sarah has moved on to Manhattan and swears, she will be there her whole life. She weathered through COVID and actually successfully got married, not nearly the way they envisioned, but has a great husband. Her profession is she is a senior producer for the Today Show on NBC.

She's done fabulous work. So much, so she just finished a cooking series with Savannah Guthrie, and they had a great time doing it. I always kid her that she has the dream job of all dream jobs, but she works incredibly strong and gets a great lot of accolades.

My youngest, Jenna, she graduated from nursing school, University of Pittsburgh. Went on, and her passion was oncology nursing. She started at MD Anderson, which was one of the top, if not the top, cancer treatment centers in the country. Then after getting her graduate degree, she was recruited by Advent Health, in all places, Orlando, which is where her growing up years were spent. She's living a mile and a half from her friends since she was six years old. She's loving life and she's about to get married.

Thank you for asking. They've been a big part of AGC, and they remember all their times and relationships going back and forth to the AGC meetings and how blessed they were to have those experiences.

Denise is keeping me in line as she always has. She's continuing to play a lot of tennis. Her latest passion is volunteering as a Friend of Rookery Bay, which is the basin around our home and Marco Island. She's got a passion for looking after the marine environment, so much so she's out even shark tagging to wee hours of the morning, which I never envisioned, but she's doing great. Like I said, she keeps me going and I love her to death.

Haire: That's great. As I mentioned at the start, you're currently AGC national senior vice president, and will be the next president of AGC. Can you share with our audience the roles of the AGC officers and your plans for your term as president?

Snyder: Sure. Currently, as you said, I'm senior vice president. Dan Fordyce from Fordyce Construction Mississippi, he is president, and we're following through his charge of forward with AGC. It's going to be a great ride.

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Backing up, both of us just got finished serving with Bob Lanham and Jeff on a two-year stint getting the organization through COVID. The AGC of America staff is fantastic. They reacted to the COVID period and jumped in the business and helped get through so many tremendous charges that this industry withstood.

Then Tom Brown from the Sierra Pacific Construction in San Diego is vice president. Tom will move forward with me as senior vice president next year.

Henry Massman is our chairman this year. In another example of AGC family, my father's first construction job was putting in the bridge piers in the New Orleans River Bridge, which is currently the Crescent City Bridge. That was his company. And then Henry Massman's company came in and put the bridge structure on top of it. We joke about that, who could remember such things, but that's an example of the strength of our AGC family and how the longevity of those relationships goes.

What I see is along my plans as president is to follow up and carry on with Dan's mission. I have an awfully large passion in the new generations entering the construction industry, both in management workforce and promoting the opportunities for them. They're so diverse and smart in AGC of America's charge to make sure we open more and more doors for all who are involved.

I have a lot of faith, and again, my plan as president is to keep opening those doors. I believe, just as we did when we started our careers, any challenges, we just plowed ahead and figured out the solution. This generation and the incoming generations are going to be finding solutions, just differently with technology and so forth, but they'll figure it out, and we'll carry on.

Haire: What do you see as the future of construction?

Snyder: Again, that strength in these new generations. They have a passion for seeing how we can build faster and build smarter. There's a passion for a broader involvement, and that brings in the diversity.

The sustainability and looking at the environment and how what we do could affect it. As I said earlier, we must affect our owners, who build buildings and build facilities, to encourage them with solutions and just make sure that the longevity of the facility of things we build are actually sustainable. I see it as a tremendous bright spot, and we've just got to find more of them who attract to the construction industry, in management, leadership and workforce.

Haire: What's something about yourself, a hobby or something else, that might surprise our listeners?

Snyder: Being in Marco, it was always our dream, but I love boating, fishing, snorkeling. I love the way where you work and fix things. I'm accused of overthinking how to do it though. That's kind of my way of getting back into the old engineering. My wife, Denise, tells me that I'm just wasting time futzing around. That's one of her "Denise-isms." She's probably right, but I do enjoy it.

Haire: As we wrap up our first Construction Conversations Industry Leader podcast, what is the best advice that you can share that it helped you become such a successful industry leader?

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Snyder: That's really a great question. I have to preface the blessing that I had of just having great mentors, which included my father, president of Dick Corporation, who spent so much time with young people. It's engaged me to do the same. My advice here is, persist to resolve every issue, and always forge ahead with optimism. It's a challenging business, and you've got to stay optimistic. Find solutions, never problems. Your attitude can be the single largest influencer on your success, so make sure it is one that commands respect, develops fellowship and provides empathy for others, but holding accountability to carry your team forward. That's the best advice I can think.

Haire: That's terrific. Thank you so much, Les, for joining us today. And Brian, thank you so much for joining us. I appreciate all your efforts, Brian, on leading the ConsensusDocs effort, which is so important to our industry.

I would just like to thank all of our listeners today for joining us, and we look forward to doing this again in another couple of months with another industry leader. Thank you everyone for joining us.

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