

# Special Series:

## one tour at a time

### Illinois Fire Group Learns about Building Components

by Melanie O. Birkeland

First in a special series on the importance of plant tours, explore how WTCA-IL made a difference in the education of the fire service.

**A**t its May meeting, the WTCA Board of Directors resolved to educate both local legislators and the fire service by asking each WTCA chapter to host component manufacturing plant tours for elected officials and members of the fire service. At the October Board meeting, this resolution was expanded to include plant tours for building officials, architects, engineers, builders as well as local high schools, colleges and any other educational institutions. Component plant tours are the easiest way to show what the structural building components industry is all about. While each group demographic may come into the plant with a different idea about what structural building components are, they come out with a better understanding of the process from design to manufacture. The response has been outstanding as chapters are jumping on board, proving that they can make a difference!

WTCA-IL did just that—they took a step in the direction of educating the fire service by hosting a truss plant tour in July. It all began when John Kiser, training officer for the Mutual Aid Box Alarm System (MABAS) division 10—a district just outside Chicago (see sidebar on facing page for more information) and a member of the Forest View Fire Department in Forest View, IL—contacted WTCA directly with a request to schedule a truss plant tour as an educational session for the personnel within the division. John's philosophy is that if you proactively educate firefighters, it will improve firefighter health and safety. As a training officer, John is acutely aware that structural building components are the most popular and economical materials used to frame structures, so he felt that it was important for them to begin including truss plant tours into their educational curriculum.

WTCA-IL president Mike Karceski, President of Atlas Components (Rockford, IL), and WTCA member Pat Plazek, Senior Vice President of Neumann Distribution Centers (Warrenville, IL), jumped at the chance to host this event and teamed up to plan a tour of Neumann Distribution's component manufacturing facility and a short classroom presentation for the fire personnel of MABAS 10.

Pat, Mike and staff prepared for the tour by doing a walk-through of the facility and planning the series of events. "We felt it was important to engage this group of firefighters from the very moment they walk in, and the timeline and coordination of the tour is crucial to capturing their attention," Mike said. "Presenting a polished and well-rehearsed tour is critical."

#### at a glance

- WTCA-IL hosted a truss plant tour for the fire service personnel of MABAS division 10 at Neumann Distribution Centers in northern Illinois.
- Planning the flow, timeline, and coordination of a truss plant tour prior to group arrival is critical to its success.
- The tour also included a Carbeck presentation where many concerns and questions were addressed.
- WTCA-IL and MABAS 10 have laid the groundwork for a mutually beneficial relationship.

The tour began at 10:00 a.m., when Pat brought attendees to the truss design department. This allowed them to view the process and procedures that truss technicians take to ensure high quality designs that are demanded by the industry. "They seemed to be impressed with the technology and what goes into building design today," Pat recalled. "It was good to show them how the products are designed and that the process adheres to all safety standards outlined within the building code."

The group asked several questions about the quality of the products, discussed certain concerns, and addressed preconceived ideas surrounding truss design. John explained the group's concerns about truss design and construction, "Within the fire service there have been numerous rumors regarding the sub-par manufacturing of trusses and the use of gusset plates. These concepts have been further validated by fire service created educational videos and materials. The truss technician was able to show the attendees that the design process within the facility is consistent and accurate due to standards put into place for each truss built."

Pat and the truss design department at Neumann Distribution Centers answered questions from the fire officials, addressing the building code or structural concerns raised. They then displayed examples of truss designs and placement diagrams, allowing the group to see the design process from beginning to end. "The most valuable portion of the tour was interacting with the truss technician while he designed the roof components for a home. It gave us the understanding that each individual truss is designed and constructed for a specific need," John said about seeing the design process.

After the plant tour, Mike gathered the group for a presentation highlighting sections of the newly updated Carbeck CD. The purpose of the presentation was to get the group to understand and utilize the information provided within the CD and convey the resources available to them for future education. Each attendee received a "Structural Building Components Industry Education for Fire Service Personnel" binder that included several industry-specific articles, the Carbeck CD, and other training materials. The Carbeck presentation provoked meaningful questions about structural building components and at times helped to dispel misconceptions about light-weight component construction. "It was helpful to talk about some of the basic building principles surrounding light-weight construction," Mike said. Several sections of the Carbeck CD spawned constructive feedback from the group as the discussion turned to important safety issues. "The discussion allowed us to understand the specific areas of education that the fire service really needs. WTCA and its chapters can provide the education that the fire service needs most," he noted.

At the end of the presentation John and others stayed to discuss the event and to offer some feedback about the education provided. With John's experience in training MABAS 10 he was able to provide much insight into what the industry can do to engage the fire service in the most effective way. Ultimately both the structural building components industry and the fire service share a common goal—saving lives. "Between the leaders of the fire service and WTCA, we can collect data and process it so that each of us understands what the other is trying to accomplish," John said. "Understanding building construction is one of the most vital aspects of fire/rescue tactics."

## MABAS:

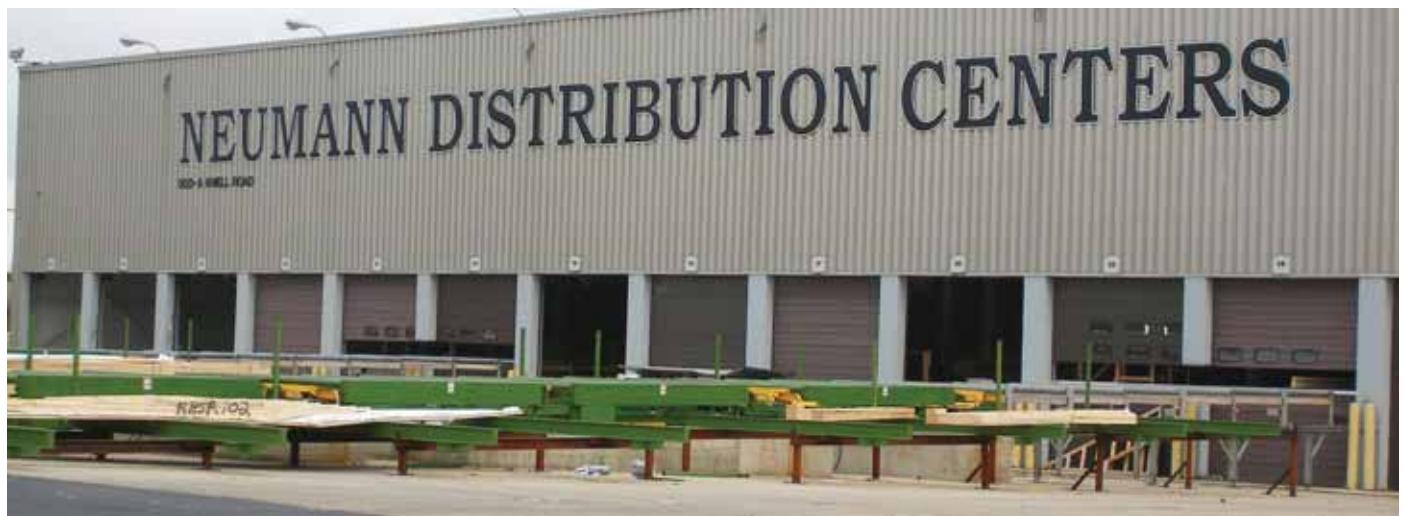
MABAS (Mutual Aid Box Alarm System) is a mutual aid organization that has been in existence since the late 1960s. MABAS is a cooperative program that includes over 550 member fire departments organized within 46 divisions. All MABAS member agencies agree to send help and resources as available to other districts when they are in need. Visit [www.mabas.org](http://www.mabas.org) for more information.



John enthusiastically suggested that WTCA-IL and MABAS continue to develop their relationship by scheduling future mutually educational events. Some of the ideas that John discussed about future educational opportunities include:

- Putting together a specific tour concept package for Illinois that can be disseminated to fire departments along with the Carbeck CD and fire personnel binders.
- Provide props like miniature trusses to fire departments to be used in demonstrations and to ensure common terminology.

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- Build relationships with some of the state associations such as the Illinois Fire Service Institute (IFSI), and the state fire academy to conduct joint testing.

The relationship-building that occurred at Neumann Distribution Centers that day has turned out to be valuable. The dialogue was helpful to both groups as discussion of future educational events with WTCA and the fire service were explored. "The fire service is always open to furthering relationships that can improve the safety of our people," John

said regarding joint education opportunities in the future. This is a step in the right direction for the structural building components industry and the safety of fire personnel, because it has opened the doors to strengthen both industries. John is looking to adding a component plant tour to the standard educational curriculum for MABAS 10; WTCA-IL is ready and willing to host them.

"All we want to do is help the fire service understand how these buildings are constructed so they can determine safer ways to fight the fires," Mike concluded. "Everyone agrees that firefighter safety is the goal here." SBC

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