In a variety of key roles over 34 years, retiring ARTBA senior executive Bill Toohey has been like a starting point guard in basketball, effectively running the offense and seeing how the next play will develop.

He believes much of ARTBA’s success in Washington is the result of “framing the debate on our issues—making our ideas a focal point of discussion.” That’s been true, he says, “since Horatio Earle founded the association in 1902 to push for a federal-state partnership to build a modern interstate highway network.”

ARTBA leads by setting goals, building a persuasive intellectual case, and then pursuing its goals doggedly, Toohey says.

“When it comes to running the offense, Bill knows how to distribute the ball to a group of individually successful people in a manner that makes them cohesive, effective, and a productive team all contributing to a common goal,” says HNTB Executive Vice President Paul Yarossi.

Toohey was hired in 1985 as ARTBA’s director of public relations to expand the association’s communications program. As a first step, he asked a widely-respected past ARTBA chairman, Jim Caywood, the president of the De Leuw, Cather design firm and general manager of the Washington, D.C., Metrorail construction project, to chair a committee to move a plan.

“It was really a blank canvas,” Toohey remembers. “It was fun building a program to support ARTBA’s advocacy agenda. I wanted to use political campaign tools. Jim was a great supporter and got leadership buy in.” It led to the creation of the “Building a Better America Through Transportation (BABATT) campaign and what’s known today as the “Transportation Makes America Work” (TMAW) advocacy program.

Ruane-Toohey Partnership

But it’s the partnership that emerged during his fourth year that really set the stage for Toohey’s tenure and ARTBA’s success. That’s when ARTBA hired Pete Ruane as its chief executive.

“Pete and I have a similar outlook on family, life and work,” Toohey says. “We’re both mission-driven, goal-oriented and competitive. He proved to be a fantastic mentor, always supported me and allowed me to be creative and expand my professional horizons. I think we made a good team.” Ruane, who retired in October after 30 years as president and CEO of ARTBA, agrees.
Bill Toohey’s ARTBA Leadership Roles

1985: Director of Public Relations
1990: Vice President of Communications
1997: Senior Vice President
2004: Executive Vice President & Chief Operating Officer
2018: Acting President & CEO

“Bill was a dependable, loyal colleague and team member that I counted on for everything,” Ruane says. “He was always there when you needed him, and more than just being there, he was there with answers, with ideas, and with help that was really on the mark.”

Toohey also found commonality with the association’s membership. “ARTBA members—in every division—are problem solvers. Who doesn’t want to help solve big problems? They are also creators. I like working with people who create tangible products and make a difference.”

Many Accomplishments

During his tenure, Toohey worked on nearly a dozen federal surface transportation and other infrastructure investment acts, plus numerous innovative policies and programs.

As examples, he points to Highway Trust Fund (HTF) reforms enacted in the late-1990’s, which ended the longtime impoundment of this important revenue source and, more recently, progress toward creating—and providing dedicated funding for—a program to modernize the nation’s critical commerce corridors (3C).

In the former, Toohey helped organize and manage the Alliance for Truth in Transportation Budgeting, a coalition of more than 100 national organizations. The Alliance teamed with then House Transportation & Infrastructure Committee Chairman Bud Shuster (R-Pa.) to pass the “Truth in Budgeting Act,” in the House. That ultimately led, in the 1998 TEA-21 law, to freeing over $40 billion held captive in the trust fund for surface transportation investments.

“The way we positioned the issue, it became untenable for politicians to defend their past budget practices,” he says.

“We’ve been pushing the Critical Commerce Corridors proposal for almost a decade,” Toohey notes of the latter effort. “The last two authorizations have put the statutory framework in place for a National Highway Freight Network program. All that is needed now is the money necessary to start modernizing those critical 66,000 miles. I think we will get there in the relative near future.”

Industry veteran Bob Burleson, who retired in December after 30 years as president of the Florida Transportation Builders’ Association, Inc., praised Toohey as a “quick study” on policy issues who could help a group such as the AASHTO-AGC-ARTBA Joint Committee reach consensus.

“He would sit through our caucuses and boil it down to a position,” Burleson says. “He always nailed it.”

Constant Communications

Toohey, who earned a degree in journalism at the University of Maryland and has put those skills to work over his career, has seen and managed a sea change in how information is used to influence public policy. Over the past three decades, ARTBA has adapted to and capitalized on new communication technology to advance its agenda—through the now near obsolete fax machine in the 1980s, the electronic bulletin boards and internet start-ups in the 1990s, to today’s digital tools.

But the rapid evolution and adoption of this technology has also created “an environment of white noise—information overload,” Toohey thinks.

“Technology is great, but the communications environment we have today reinforces in my mind the importance of personal communication and relationships to cut through the noise. That’s what associations are all about. Nothing is as effective as talking face-to-face with your elected officials. It’s communicating person-to-person. It has become too easy to hide behind digital in so many facets of life.”

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Hoop Lessons

An avid Maryland Terrapins basketball fan—he and his wife, Mary, have attended most home games for years—Toohey says coaching youth league basketball taught him a lot about managing people and teamwork.

“Nobody wants to fail. Everyone wants to play,” he says. “I think it’s about trying to put people in positions to succeed and contribute. It’s about maximizing strengths and minimizing weaknesses. It’s about getting people on the same page and then understanding and embracing their role within the group. It takes a team to win. No one does it by themselves.”

And it helps to have some fun along the way.

“Never in my wildest imagination would I have thought in 1985 that I would stay at ARTBA for more than 34 years,” Toohey says. “There were several reasons that happened—mission, mentor, membership and because I have enjoyed it. It hasn’t been just a job. It’s felt like it was what I was meant to do.”

“I truly believe in ARTBA’s mission of driving investment in transportation infrastructure,” Toohey says. “If we are successful for our members, the nation benefits too. Our children and grandchildren benefit. You can make a difference working at, or supporting, ARTBA. I’ve found it immensely rewarding.”

Family First

Asked what he is most proud of, Toohey has a quick answer—his family. “I have been blessed with a great wife and three exceptional children, Bridget, Bill and Mike, who are now successful adults. Mary, who has been by my side for 42 years, has been the key to it all.”

In retirement, Bill says he is going to use some of the three-hours-per-day he’ll save no longer commuting to work, with his family—particularly grandson, Drew, 7. And he’s going to work on improving his golf game, starting with a trip to Ireland to attend a short game school. Ever the journalist and communicator, Toohey said he is also “toying with the idea of doing some writing.”

As for ARTBA, he thinks the future is bright for two reasons.

“First, ARTBA has exceptional executives in its volunteer leadership—individuals who are true industry leaders. That makes all the difference.

“Second, I’ve had the good fortune to work with the new ARTBA president and CEO, Dave Bauer, and new COO, Matt Jeanneret, for over 20 years. They’ve earned those positions and are extremely capable. And they have a very deep bench of mission-driven, talented and experienced people on staff. It’s not just a team, it’s like a family. They are going to continue doing a great job for the membership.”

Mark Holan is ARTBA’s editorial director.