

SECOND EDITION 2026

SMACNA GREATER CHICAGO

METAL PRESS

ASSOCIATION NEWSLETTER

FEATURED IN THIS ISSUE



SECOND EDITION 2026

LETTER FROM THE PRESIDENT

It's been a busy spring across our industry — that's a good thing. Data center work continues to surge throughout the Midwest, tenant improvement projects are keeping crews moving and contractors across the board are seeing strong numbers. By most measures, this is shaping up to be a good year.

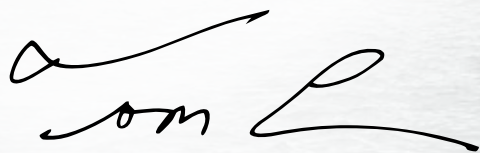
At the same time, there's a reality behind all that momentum: we don't have enough people to do all the work in front of us. Every contractor on the SMACNA Greater Chicago Board is looking for skilled workers right now. And as we continue negotiations with Local 73, maintaining a strong labor-management partnership remains a top priority. We need to work through these challenges together because our ability to grow depends on our ability to staff the work.

That's why recruitment has to stay front and center. We need to show up at high school career fairs and start having conversations with young people before they've already decided the trades aren't for them. This industry offers real earning potential, stability and long-term opportunity, and we need to do a better job telling that story. The average age in our workforce continues to climb, and if we don't build the pipeline now, we'll feel it in the years ahead.

Beyond people, we also need to be thinking about tech tools that can help us work smarter. AI can assist with estimating, reviewing specs and improving office operations. But it can't replace the skilled people doing the work in the field. If anything, the more efficient technology makes us behind the scenes, the more it highlights the value of experienced craftworkers on the jobsite. That's something we should be proud of, and something we need to communicate more publicly because too many people still picture this industry the way it looked 30 years ago.

With tariffs, policy shifts and economic uncertainty creating challenges, there's no shortage of outside noise. Some of that is outside our control. But what we can control is how we work together. Whether you're on the contractor side or the labor side, in the office or in the field, I want SMACNA Greater Chicago to continue being an organization where we're moving in the same direction. If one part of the industry succeeds, we all should.

I'm grateful for the opportunity to lead this chapter, and I'm excited about what's ahead. There's plenty of work to do. Fortunately, that's what we do best.



TOM COONAN
President, SMACNA Greater Chicago

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SAVE THE DATE

SMACNAPALOOZA INDUSTRY NIGHT

09.17.26 JOE'S LIVE
ROSEMONT, ILLINOIS

Industry Night is back and louder than ever! Join us as we rewind it to the '80s for our gnarliest networking event of the year, complete with a killer lineup of industry vendors and totally awesome networking opportunities (legwarmers and Walkman optional).



Book your VIP ticket as an exhibitor before the tour sells out!
Email laurie@smacnagreaterchicago.org for details.



IN BRIEF

On April 22, SMACNA Greater Chicago's YES+ group toured the new SMART Local 265 Training Center, getting a firsthand look at apprentice demonstrations, cutting-edge laser table technology and the expanded facilities shaping the next generation of sheet metal and HVACR workers.



EVENT RECAP

METAL + MEALS

YES+ METAL & MEALS: A LOOK INSIDE LOCAL 265'S NEW TRAINING CENTER

04.22.26 | DOWNERS GROVE, ILLINOIS

On April 22, the SMACNA Greater Chicago's YES+ group got an up-close look at the future of industry training during a tour of the new SMART Local 265 Training Center in Downers Grove.

Hosted by Training Director Joe Carone and the Local 265 team, the event featured live, hands-on demonstrations from apprentices in the sheet metal shop and HVACR labs, a classroom session covering EPA Section 608 requirements and a firsthand look at PPI laser table technology in action.

Carone said the expanded facility reflects the strong partnership between Local 265 and SMACNA Greater Chicago — and creates new opportunities to elevate training across the industry.

"For the HVACR service apprenticeship, the larger footprint gives us greater opportunities to train on a wider range of residential and commercial equipment," he said. "For sheet metal, the focus is on enhanced shop equipment and hands on fabrication training. Our welding expansion will further strengthen this, bringing in three new laser welding machines that open the door to advanced training and higher precision work."

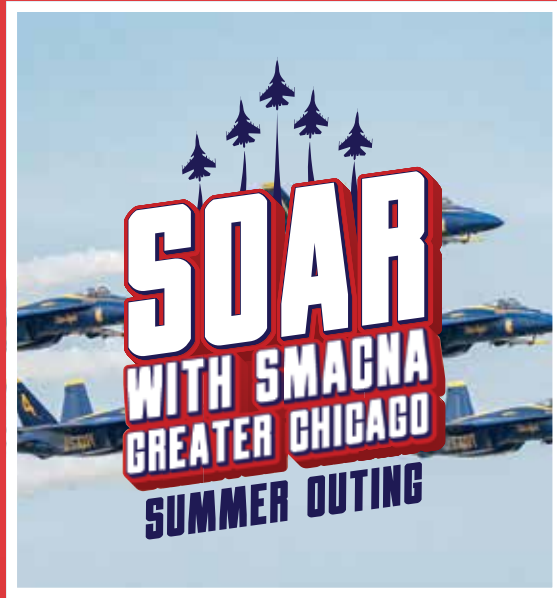
The event wrapped up with great food, drinks and conversation, giving attendees a chance to connect while seeing how the next generation of skilled professionals is being trained. Thanks to the Local 265 instructors, union officials and everyone who joined us!



Learn more about YES+
SMACNAGreaterChicago.org/YES



■ *SAVE THE DATE*



SMACNA GREATER CHICAGO
SUMMER OUTING
CHICAGO AIR & WATER SHOW

08.15.26

THEATER ON THE LAKE
CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

The Chicago Air & Water Show, one of the city's most beloved summer traditions. We're excited to welcome you to the Lakefront Green at Theater on the Lake for an unforgettable day of summer fun.

Our private spectator tents, located just south of the circle drive, offer stunning views of Lake Michigan and the Chicago skyline as the Blue Angels, Golden Knights and more take to the skies and water below. Expect aerial acrobatics, parachute demonstrations and captivating water performances, all from an upscale, open-air setting.

Guests will enjoy unlimited beer, wine and handcrafted cocktails flowing all afternoon, paired with a hearty lunch buffet from Chicago favorite Smoque BBQ.



For full details and to register, visit:
SMACNAGreaterChicago.org/Summer-Outing





■ IN BRIEF

At the May Membership Meeting, labor and employment attorney Christina Wernick of Laner Muchin broke down the critical changes to the Illinois Prevailing Wage Act that took effect July 1, 2026 — and what contractors need to do right now to get compliant.

■ THREE BIG THINGS

WHAT TO KNOW ABOUT ILLINOIS' NEW PREVAILING WAGE LANGUAGE

SMACNA Greater Chicago welcomed Christina Wernick of Laner Muchin as the featured speaker at our May Membership Meeting. Wernick, a labor and employment attorney who now represents management, pulled no punches from the start: "This is not going to be a feel-good presentation, but it's critical to your industry."

The subject was HB 2488 (now an Act) and the sweeping changes it makes to the Illinois Prevailing Wage Act, which took effect July 1, 2026. Here are the three things every contractor needs to understand.

1



WHAT CHANGED AND WHY IT MATTERS

HB 2488 flew under the radar when it was introduced, and that's part of the problem. The amendment to the Illinois Prevailing Wage Act requires that apprentices on prevailing wage projects receive the full journeyman-level fringe benefits — regardless of what your collective bargaining agreement says.

IMSCA helped push the original effective date back to July 1 to give contractors more runway, but that date has now come and gone — the requirement is live. IDOL has been unambiguous: its enforcement position is that apprentices on prevailing wage projects must receive the full journeyman benefit rate. Importantly, labor is divided on this issue. AFL-CIO has not taken a stance, and IDOL isn't rushing to issue guidance, making it harder for contractors to get clear answers.

2



COMPLIANCE AND ENFORCEMENT

Wernick outlined two primary paths to compliance, noting non-compliance carries steep penalties: 20% annual interest on backpay or 5% compounding monthly.

SMART Locals 73 and 265, together with SMACNA Greater Chicago, have reached agreements requiring that full journeyman fringe benefit contributions be paid for all apprentice hours worked on prevailing wage projects. As of this writing, the Local 73 and Local 265 Fund Offices are updating their online payment portals to accommodate these contributions. Additional information regarding the reporting procedures will be provided as soon as it becomes available.

3



KEY TAKEAWAYS

Wernick's action items, to be completed without delay since the requirement is already in force:

- Review your CBAs with legal counsel to understand where HB 2488 supersedes negotiated apprentice fringe benefit provisions.
- Update your bid models to reflect higher apprentice costs on prevailing wage work — government projects are the clearest indicator; renewable energy credit projects may also qualify.
- Don't wait to update payroll systems, benefit fund reporting and project accounting. The compliance window is already open.
- Consult legal counsel. Guidance from IDOL is limited, and the stakes are high.



ABOUT SYNERGY MECHANICAL SOLUTIONS

Founded in 2006 by Tom Sullivan Sr., Synergy Mechanical Solutions serves as a full-service link between HVAC equipment manufacturers and the contractors, engineers and building owners who need them. The company has built its reputation on deep product expertise and a commitment to transparency, and is looking ahead to continued growth.

ASSOCIATE MEMBER FEATURE



SYNERGY MECHANICAL SOLUTIONS: BUILT ON RELATIONSHIPS, DRIVEN BY EXPERTISE

There's a reason Synergy Mechanical Solutions named itself after the concept of combined strength. For the Elk Grove Village-based manufacturers' representative, the name isn't just a tagline, it's a philosophy that shapes every customer relationship, vendor partnership and project they touch.

President Tom Sullivan Sr. spent decades in the industry before launching Synergy in 2006, starting as a teenager sweeping floors at a manufacturers' rep firm. His son Tom Jr. and longtime family friend Matt Boudas eventually joined him, building a 12-person team tight-knit enough to celebrate every single employee's birthday.

"I always had a hunch I was going to work for my dad. He's one of my role models," Tom Jr. said.

The Full-Service Difference

For contractors who may be less familiar with the manufacturers' rep model, Synergy serves as the critical link between HVAC equipment manufacturers and the mechanical contractors, engineers, architects and building owners who need those products. Their commercial portfolio spans VRF systems, heat pumps, makeup air units, rooftop units, fan coil units and more, but Synergy's value goes beyond moving product.

The team prides itself on deep product expertise and offering a one-stop shop, from initial bids and proper equipment sizing all the way through commissioning, parts, service and warranty support.

"We pride ourselves on the equipment and lines that we sell — not just being able to sell it, but knowing the ins and outs of the products," Matt said. "Our guys are trained to be experts."

That expertise spans a wide range of market segments: Chicago high-rise projects like the St. Regis Hotel and 1000M, along with millions of square feet of makeup air installations for warehouses — a fast-growing sector given Chicago's role as a central transportation hub. Recent project highlights include supplying over 560 vertical stacked heat pumps for 370 Morgan Street Apartments in Fulton Market, and large-scale rooftop unit installations for commercial and industrial facilities across the region.

One of the team's most valued differentiators is their commissioning capability. Synergy's engineers work from design through final installation, ensuring that what was drawn up on paper actually performs as intended.

"A building can go through a whole lifecycle before it hits its intended use," Matt said. "We've spent a lot of time dialing it in. The team that starts the project is there at the end. From design and bidding through installation, startup, commissioning and warranty support, we stay close to the details as the project evolves. Whether it's a question, quote or parts request, we take the time to understand the full picture before responding. That approach helps us provide support that's not just quick, but right for the project and the relationship long-term."



Trust, Every Time

It's no secret the HVAC industry is fast-moving and unpredictable. Synergy's answer is straightforward: be honest and upfront with customers, every time.

"Tough truth and transparency is something we pride ourselves on," Tom Jr. said.

"There was a lot of that during COVID with lead times. After it was over, people remembered that and came to us knowing they could put big projects in our hands."

"Synergy comes from merging the relationships," Matt added. "We like to have an open and transparent relationship from all factors, because it makes everything easier — our customers see that and love it, and our manufacturers see that and love it."

The Road Ahead

Synergy has been a SMACNA Greater Chicago associate member for just over a year, and the team has already found real value in the organization's events and

connections — both as a way to stay current on where the industry is heading and to get face time with customers they don't always have the opportunity to see.

"As we get further into our careers, you start to realize how expansive this industry is,"

Matt said. "Having those opportunities to build new relationships has been really fundamental."

Looking ahead, Synergy plans to grow, with aggressive hiring on the horizon and a continued focus on developing each team member's individual strengths and areas of

expertise. The open-door culture Tom Sr. established — where any employee can walk into his office just as easily as anyone else's — is something the younger generation intends to carry forward.

"There's really no ceiling," Tom Jr. said. "My father built this from sweeping the floors, and that gives you an internal motivation. He set an incredible foundation."

"We pride ourselves on the equipment and lines that we sell — not just being able to sell it, but knowing the ins and outs of the products. Our guys are trained to be experts."

MATT BOUDAS

Vice President, Sales and Engineering



Learn more about Synergy Mechanical Solutions
synergy-ms.com

IN BRIEF

Labor and employment attorney Christina Wernick of Laner Muchin joined us as the featured speaker for our May membership meeting, where she delivered an insightful presentation on critical changes to our industry's prevailing wage requirements.

EVENT RECAP

BIG CHANGES TO PREVAILING WAGE EFFECTIVE JULY 1

05.12.26 | OAK BROOK, ILLINOIS

Our May Membership Meeting brought more than 60 SMACNA Greater Chicago members together for a delicious surf-and-turf lunch at Gibsons Bar & Steakhouse in Oak Brook. Our last meeting before we adjourn for the summer featured labor and employment attorney Christina Wernick of Laner Muchin, who delivered a candid presentation on significant changes to the Illinois Prevailing Wage Act that every contractor needs to know about.

The big one: HB 2488 now requires that apprentices on prevailing wage projects receive fringe benefits at the full journeyman rate, no matter what your CBA says. That gap can add up to several dollars per hour, per apprentice. And the clock is ticking: July 1, 2026 is the effective date.

Wernick outlined two primary compliance paths: adding the benefit differential as cash wages to the apprentice's paycheck, or — where fund rules allow — making additional contributions directly to benefit funds. Either way, calculations must be done by trade, by county and by agreement.

"This has the potential to make life an absolute nightmare for your HR people," Wernick said.



**FOR MORE DETAILED
INFORMATION ON
THE PRESENTATION:**

See the 3 Big Things article on pages 6-7.



NEW TO THE ASSOCIATION

WELCOME TO SMACNA GREATER CHICAGO!

The strength of SMACNA Greater Chicago lies in the expertise and energy that each of our valued members brings to our association. Join us in welcoming our newest member!



Glendale Heights, Illinois

ASSOCIATE MEMBER **LENNOX INTERNATIONAL**

Lennox is a leader in energy-efficient climate control solutions, dedicated to delivering “perfect air” through innovative heating, cooling, indoor air quality and refrigeration systems. Focused on sustainability, Lennox designs high-performance solutions that create more comfortable, healthier indoor environments for residential and commercial customers while helping reduce environmental impact. With a long legacy of innovation, the company continues to set industry standards in efficiency, reliability and advanced climate technology.

(630) 894-5550 | **JAYLEN THOMPSON**
jaylen.thompson@lennox.com

■ **SAVE THE DATE**



2026 ANNUAL GOLF OUTING

08.03.26

**STONEBRIDGE
COUNTRY CLUB**

**REGISTRATION:
SOLD OUT**

Tee it up with SMACNA Greater Chicago at Stonebridge Country Club for a relaxed golf outing featuring lunch before tee-off, a full round of friendly competition and on-course challenges. Stick around after the final putt to unwind with cocktails and dinner.

Looking to put your brand in play?

Sponsorship opportunities are available. Email laurie@smacnagreaterchicago.org for details.



For full details, visit:
SMACNAGreaterChicago.org/Golf-Outing

IN BRIEF

SMACNA Greater Chicago members heard from Dan Allen of CISCO at our March Member Meeting, learning how the labor-management organization supports union construction through workforce development, public outreach and political advocacy.

EVENT RECAP

CISCO AND THE FUTURE OF UNION CONSTRUCTION

03.10.26 | OAK BROOK, ILLINOIS

SMACNA Greater Chicago members gathered on March 10 for our monthly member meeting. The guest presenter was Dan Allen, a proud three-generation IBEW 134 member and representative of CISCO — the Construction Industry Service Corporation. A collaborative labor-management organization, CISCO works to enhance the competitive edge of union construction by cultivating trust between contractors and building trades unions across the Chicago metro area.

Key highlights from Allen's presentation included:

- **Workforce Pipeline & Youth Outreach:** CISCO connects young people to careers in the skilled trades through hands-on career fairs, including a recent DuPage County event that drew 600–700 students, along with direct outreach to school counselors. “This is an amazing industry,” Allen noted. “It just doesn’t have the right marketing.”
- **Community Access & Equity:** Programs like Hire 360 and Access United extend CISCO’s reach into disadvantaged communities, offering free entrance exam training and fully-loaded backpacks to students.
- **Political Advocacy:** CISCO testifies and sends letters to elected officials on behalf of the industry. The organization participates in the Illinois State Apprenticeship Council, the Prevailing Wage Committee and Fair Contracting events.
- **Legislative Watch:** Allen flagged an IMSCA provision that could unintentionally limit apprentice opportunities on public jobs by redefining prevailing wage requirements. The provision carries a sunset clause through June and is one CISCO is closely monitoring.
- **Scholarships & Data Center Advocacy:** CISCO awards scholarships annually and is conducting research-backed outreach to counter misinformation about data centers and their role in regional construction growth.

Allen closed with an encouraging message for SMACNA Greater Chicago members: “We are behind you 100%. We’re the forcefield behind you, and we help level the playing field.”





LEGISLATIVE

ILLINOIS PREVAILING WAGE UPDATE: *KEY ISSUES HEADED TO FALL VETO SESSION*

HB 4751: PREVAILING WAGE JOURNEYMAN APPRENTICE “CLEAN UP” DID NOT ADVANCE

Initiated by the Illinois Mechanical & Specialty Contractors Association (IMSCA), HB 4751 (Hoffman) aimed to reinstate critical components of the Prevailing Wage Act (“Act”). These provisions were originally altered by Public Act 104-17, which passed at the conclusion of the 2025 Spring Session. Subsequent legislation during the 2025 Fall Veto Session postponed the effective date until July 1, 2026.

HB 4751 sought to clarify that the Act does not prohibit the payment of wages and fringe benefits based on a worker’s specific craft and skill level, provided these rates are established through a collective bargaining agreement. Despite its potential to provide necessary clarity and fairness in wage structures, the bill remained stalled in the House Rules Committee as the session ended. Accordingly, this change in Illinois will take effect on July 1, 2026.

SB 3393: LABOR OMNIBUS PACKAGE STALLS

Introduced toward the conclusion of the session, SB 3393, commonly known as the Omnibus Labor Package, encompassed a variety of labor-related initiatives. The Illinois Mechanical & Specialty Contractors Association (IMSCA) opposed the bill because of House Amendment #3, which aimed to eliminate the established “seller/supplier exemption” found in the Illinois Prevailing Wage Act. While the legislation successfully cleared the House, it stalled after the Senate declined to take it up for concurrence. Advocates and opponents anticipate that the proposal will resurface for consideration when the Illinois General Assembly reconvenes for the Fall Veto Session later this year.

LOOKING AHEAD

The lack of finality on these issues is not a permanent defeat, but rather a shift in the legislative timeline. The General Assembly is scheduled to reconvene for the Fall Veto Session on November 17-19 and December 1-3. During this Fall Session, the “seller/supplier exemption” and the broader labor omnibus package are expected to be the subjects of continued discussion and negotiation.



ABOUT EMCOR SERVICES TEAM MECHANICAL

EMCOR Services Team Mechanical brings the resources of a Fortune 500 specialty contractor to the Chicago market through a 150-person team built for the full project lifecycle — from design-build and prefabrication to emergency response and energy optimization. Vice President of Construction Patrick O'Brien says the company's edge is its ability to operate with national scale while staying rooted in the local relationships and union partnerships that define quality work in the region.

MEMBER FEATURE

EMCOR SERVICES TEAM MECHANICAL: LOCAL EXPERTISE, NATIONAL SCALE

A FORTUNE 500 SUBSIDIARY WITH DEEP CHICAGO ROOTS

When you're part of a Fortune 500 company with 44,000 employees and more than 100 subsidiaries across North America, it would be easy to lose the personal touch. EMCOR Services Team Mechanical (ESTM) has figured out how to have it both ways.

As a roughly 150-person subsidiary of EMCOR Group — one of the country's leading specialty contractors — ESTM operates with the responsiveness and local knowledge of a Chicagoland firm while drawing on the resources, technology and best practices of a national enterprise.

"EMCOR Services Team Mechanical has grown from a traditional mechanical contractor into a full-service partner for building owners," said Patrick O'Brien, Vice President of Construction at ESTM. "Over time, the focus has expanded beyond installation to lifecycle solutions — design-build, service, retrofits, energy optimization, prefabrication and round-the-clock support."

That breadth shows up in ESTM's project work across the region. When a 500-ton absorption chiller failed at a private Chicago medical research center, ESTM mobilized immediately — engineering a temporary cooling solution, running hoses up the side



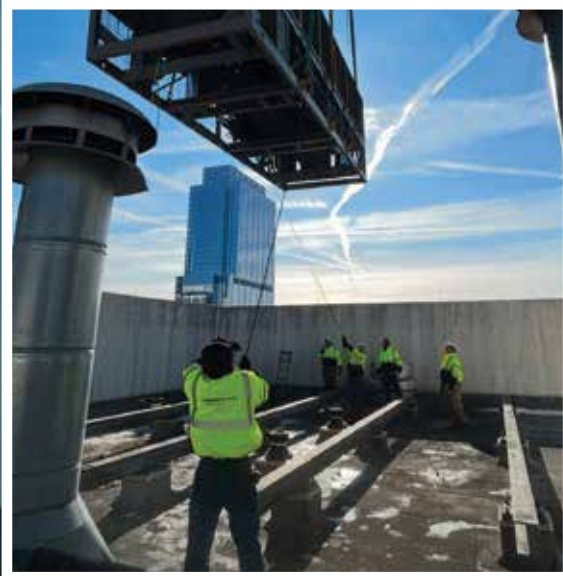
of the building and restoring climate control within hours, preserving hundreds of long-term, temperature-sensitive experiments throughout the summer. On the energy side, a high-efficiency industrial burner installation at a chemical manufacturing plant in Ringwood saved the facility 200,000 therms in its first year of operation and helped secure a \$65,000 utility rebate — with the total project cost recouped in under 12 months.

Staying ahead of the curve in a rapidly changing industry requires constant investment. ESTM leverages knowledge-sharing across EMCOR Group's subsidiary network alongside advanced controls, prefabrication, BIM and data-driven service platforms to turn emerging trends into practical solutions for customers.

For SMACNA Greater Chicago members, ESTM is a familiar face — and one that understands the value of the association firsthand.

“Organizations like SMACNA Greater Chicago provide critical value through workforce development, labor relations, safety resources, technical standards and advocacy,” O’Brien said. “As the industry faces labor shortages, new technologies and regulatory pressure, associations play an essential role in helping contractors adapt, collaborate and maintain the high standards expected by owners and end users.”

Union partnerships are equally foundational. Strong relationships with skilled trade unions ensure access to a trained workforce and



“EMCOR SERVICES TEAM MECHANICAL HAS GROWN FROM A TRADITIONAL MECHANICAL CONTRACTOR INTO A FULL-SERVICE PARTNER FOR BUILDING OWNERS. OVER TIME, THE FOCUS HAS EXPANDED BEYOND INSTALLATION TO LIFECYCLE SOLUTIONS — DESIGN-BUILD, SERVICE, RETROFITS, ENERGY OPTIMIZATION, PREFABRICATION AND ROUND-THE-CLOCK SUPPORT.”

PATRICK O'BRIEN | *EMCOR Services Team Mechanical Vice President of Construction*

support the apprenticeship pipelines that allow ESTM to maintain craft standards across every market it serves. It's an approach that reflects EMCOR's guiding principle — “Mission First, People Always” — which shows up just as clearly in how the company handles safety: not as a compliance program, but as a core value built on field leadership, accountability at every level and an environment where employees are empowered to speak up. Maintaining that culture across a large, distributed workforce requires, as O'Brien puts it, “constant reinforcement, transparent communication and leadership commitment.”

Looking ahead, O'Brien sees a market being reshaped in real time. Workforce shortages, compressed schedules, supply chain volatility and evolving regulations continue to pressure

contractors. But demand is accelerating in data centers, healthcare, life sciences, energy retrofits and advanced manufacturing, creating significant opportunities for firms prepared to adapt. For ESTM, that means continued investment in workforce development, prefabrication, digital technology and the local relationships that have defined the company's success in Chicago.

“What's most exciting is EMCOR's ability to grow while staying grounded in local expertise,” O'Brien said.

That balance — national strength, local accountability — is what continues to position ESTM as a trusted partner in an increasingly complex industry.



*Learn more about
EMCOR Services Team Mechanical
emcortmi.com/*

IN BRIEF

From June 4-7, SMACNA Greater Chicago members gathered at Chatham Bars Inn on Cape Cod for our 2026 Annual Conference, enjoying industry updates, networking and unforgettable coastal experiences. The trip blended business with fun, including a day in Nantucket, a lighthouse tour and plenty of opportunities to reconnect and make new memories together.

EVENT RECAP

COASTAL CHARM ON THE CAPE: OUR 2026 ANNUAL CONFERENCE

6.4.26 - 6.7.26 | CAPE COD, MASSACHUSETTS

SMACNA Greater Chicago members headed to Cape Cod in June for our Annual Conference at the Chatham Bars Inn, and the event delivered the right mix of business and coastal charm we'd hoped for!

Things kicked off with a welcome reception at the Boat House, where the energy was high as everyone reconnected. We were introduced to SMACNA President Todd Hill and his wife, Tammy, along with new CEO Frank Wall and his wife, Colleen — two couples who clearly care deeply about our industry. The New England lobster bake didn't disappoint (with giant lobsters and an oyster shucker who stole the show!), and guests showed up dressed to the nines in breezy nautical vacation style.

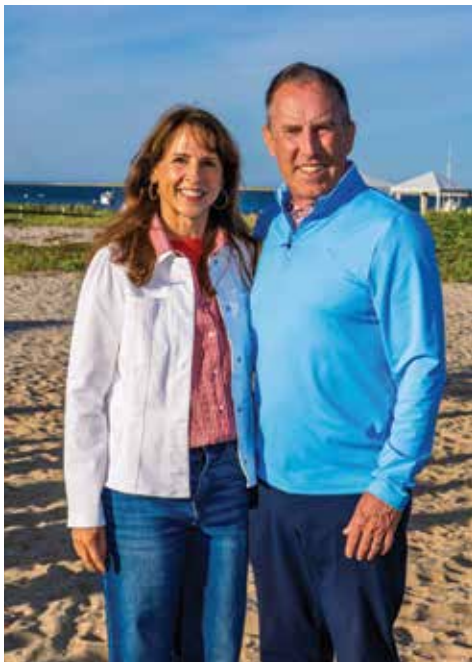
A day trip to Nantucket followed, with many members visiting the island for the first time. The ferry ride was scenic, and guests spent the day wandering cobblestone streets, popping into quaint boutiques and touring the Whaling Museum before a waterfront lunch that gave every other meal of the trip a run for its money.

Saturday balanced business and recreation: Todd Hill shared a national update over breakfast, expressing excitement for the fall SMACNA Convention in Florida and praising the strong sense of family he sees across chapters nationwide. Golfers teed off at the Starboard Course at The Captains Golf Course, while

others joined a lighthouse tour and wine tasting — complete with sweeping Atlantic views from the top of the lighthouse and an excellent pairing of wine and local history.

The weekend wrapped with a farewell reception and family-style dinner in the Harbor View Room, capping off a few days of connection, coastal beauty and incredible food. Thank you to everyone who joined us on the Cape. We're already excited to plan next year's event!





View the full album
bit.ly/4eFTKkw

IN BRIEF

AI can help contractors create marketing content faster, but clients still want to hear real stories from real people — not polished copy that feels machine-made. The companies that will stand out are the ones using AI behind the scenes while keeping their marketing rooted in real project work, employee expertise and trusted relationships.

TECHNOLOGY

HOW TO MARKET AUTHENTICALLY IN THE AGE OF AI

AI SHOULD SUPPORT YOUR STORYTELLING — NOT REPLACE IT

AI is a powerful tool in the marketing toolbox, but when and how to use it smartly is the difference between effective marketing and potential negative attention.

From drafting social media posts to generating website copy, graphics and more, AI tools are seductive. They're fast, cheap and prolific. But for contractors who build their reputations project by project, client by client, the rush to AI-generated content comes with a risk: erosion of trust.

The Trust Problem Is Real

A 2024 Deloitte consumer survey, which polled nearly 4,000 U.S. consumers, found that among people familiar with generative AI, 70% say AI-generated content makes it harder for them to trust what they see online, and 68% worry they could be deceived or scammed by it. And a survey by business and technology insight company Gartner, Inc., found that 53% of consumers distrust or lack confidence in AI-generated search results.

When prospects land on your website or see your company's social posts, they're arriving already skeptical. If they detect obvious use of generative AI — in graphics or text — it may repel them from considering your business.

What Your Clients Actually Want

In B2B environments, the hunger for real, credible content is documented. In their coverage of the

70%*

feel AI-generated content makes online information harder to trust

68%*

worry AI-generated content could be used to deceive or scam them

53%**

lack confidence in AI-generated search results

* 2024 Deloitte Consumer Survey
** Gartner, Inc. Survey



2025 B2B WorldFest conference, global communications firm Edelman reinforced this directly, asserting that authenticity in modern B2B marketing means “sharing genuine stories of people, problems and progress without being overly polished,” and that “AI is an enabler, not the storyteller.” Real-world cultural understanding, human judgment and even human imperfection are what ultimately build trust.

For SMACNA Greater Chicago members, this translates directly. A story on a foreman solving a tricky HVAC coordination problem, a photo of your crew completing a complex custom fabrication job, the testimonial from a general contractor who’s worked with you for a decade — these are irreplaceable. No AI can generate them, and clients know the difference.

Use AI to Amplify Your Voice, Not Create It

None of this means you have to avoid using AI in marketing altogether. Here’s the distinction that matters, as marketing analyst Kate O’Neill put it: “AI is a tool that amplifies human creativity, speeds up iteration or handles technical execution while humans maintain creative direction.” That’s a productive and honest use of the technology. Put simply, AI is not a substitute for genuine expression.

In practice, that might look like using AI to draft a first pass of a case study, then having the actual project manager review and rewrite it in their own voice. Or, using AI to transcribe a video interview with your company president, then editing it for authenticity. AI handles the scaffolding; your human team provides the knowledge and the substance.

Construction marketing research supports doubling down on visual storytelling grounded in real work. Before-and-after project photos, time-lapse build videos, behind-the-scenes crew content and project case studies — you can’t fake these with AI. That authenticity comes through. And it’s just plain effective marketing. Marketing’s job is to ensure that reputation is built on visible, real evidence, not polished prose that could have come from anywhere.

The Bottom Line

AI is a legitimate efficiency tool. But in a relationship-driven, project-based industry like sheet metal and HVACR contracting, authenticity is a competitive advantage that deserves protecting. Use AI to work faster and smarter behind the scenes. But when it comes to what clients actually see — your stories, your people, your projects — keep it real.

IN BRIEF

In April, SMACNA Greater Chicago member company The Hill Group hosted a full campus tour as part of the 2026 SMACNA Fab Forum, welcoming nearly 275 attendees from across the industry. Participants rotated through interactive stations showcasing fabrication, technology, workflow and innovative approaches to solving common industry challenges.

EVENT RECAP

HILL GROUP OPENS ITS DOORS FOR THE 2026 SMACNA FAB FORUM

04.12.26 - 04.14.26 | FRANKLIN PARK, ILLINOIS

The 2026 SMACNA Fab Forum got off to a memorable start in the Chicago area, thanks to SMACNA Greater Chicago member The Hill Group. The Franklin Park-based contractor hosted a full campus tour as part of the national event in April, giving nearly 275 attendees an inside look at its operations.

A third-generation, family-owned company with more than 80 years in the industry, The Hill Group has completed more than 100,000 projects and fabricated over 4 million pounds of ductwork. Its operation spans five companies across three states and employs 1,200 people — making an event of this scale no small feat.

Throughout the day, contractors rotated through more than 20 stations in 15-minute sessions, with teams demonstrating processes, technology and workflow across the facility. According to Dave Pikey, VP of Corporate Technology, the preparation behind the



■ Anthony Camasta | Operations Manager at The Hill Group



scenes was extensive, but it paid off for many employees who got a fresh perspective on the work they do every day.

"When you have a group listening for an entire day, it reminds people that what they do is pretty special," Pikey said. "When it's all over, everybody's pumped up. It's kind of electric."

That sense of shared learning and collaboration is exactly what the Fab Forum is designed to foster.

"There are wrinkles in varieties — from custom sheet metal to industrial to architectural — but we're all in the same general space," Pikey said. "This event is all about exploring different ways people solve similar problems."

Pikey made sure to shoutout Hill Group Operations Manager Anthony Camasta, who handled most of the logistics, and the many team members whose planning and coordination helped make the event a success.

Thank you to The Hill Group, SMACNA and everyone who traveled to take part in the 2026 Fab Forum.

■ **SAVE THE DATE**



SMACNA'S 2026 ANNUAL CONVENTION

10.25.26 - 10.28.26

**SIGNIA BY HILTON BONNET CREEK
AND WALDORF ASTORIA**

Mark your calendars: SMACNA's premier event of the year is headed to Orlando!

Join fellow members, chapter executives and industry partners October 25-28 at the Signia by Hilton Bonnet Creek and Waldorf Astoria for four days of networking, education and activities. This year's schedule includes keynote presentations, the popular Product Show, a Labor Forum and breakout sessions focused on challenges and opportunities facing our industry today.

The College of Fellows Golf Outing and Pickleball Tournament are also on the agenda, plus the all-new SMACNA Block Party at Universal CityWalk. Don't miss out!



Learn more and register!
bit.ly/4wkNAVR

IN BRIEF

SMACNA Greater Chicago member RJ O'Neil recently celebrated 100 years in business. Since 1926, the Montgomery-based firm has delivered HVACR, plumbing, pipefitting and maintenance services across healthcare, commercial industrial and institutional sectors.

MEMBER NEWS

BUILT TO LAST: RJ O'NEIL TURNS 100



RJONEIL™ MECHANICAL CONTRACTORS

SMACNA Greater Chicago is proud to congratulate contractor member RJ O'Neil on reaching an extraordinary milestone: 100 years in business!

Since 1926, RJ O'Neil has delivered quality HVACR, plumbing, pipefitting and maintenance services across healthcare, commercial, industrial and institutional sectors. Their longevity is no accident, it's the product of an unwavering commitment to integrity, craftsmanship and the kind of lasting client relationships that define true excellence in our industry.

"Reaching 100 years is a significant milestone that reflects the strength of our team, the trust of our clients and the value of our partnerships," said Jessica Medrano, CEO/President. "The relationships we have cultivated over generations are central to our success. While we take great pride in our history, we are equally focused on the opportunities that lie ahead."

True to that commitment, RJ O'Neil will celebrate throughout the year with employee recognition initiatives and community programs — honoring a century of legacy while investing in the next.

On behalf of SMACNA Greater Chicago and the entire mechanical contracting community, we extend our heartfelt congratulations to the team at RJ O'Neil. Here's to the next 100 years!

■ IN BRIEF

Private equity firms are increasingly targeting sheet metal contractors, making it vital for business owners to prepare long before they're ready to sell. Learn five questions every contractor should ask to strengthen their business, maximize its value and make informed ownership transition decisions.

THINKING ABOUT SELLING TO PRIVATE EQUITY?

5 QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF

1 DO YOU OWN A BUSINESS, OR A JOB?

If your company can't run without you for 30 days, a buyer won't pay much for it. You need a real management team: foremen, a project manager, an estimator who can carry the load. Having this in place isn't just good for a future sale; it's good business now.

2 ARE YOU IN SERVICE WORK, OR PURELY CONSTRUCTION?

Private equity favors recurring, predictable revenue: maintenance contracts, service agreements, repeat commercial accounts. New construction work is project-by-project and harder to value. If you have a service side, it helps. If you don't, it's worth considering.

Buyers will also look closely at customer concentration. If a large percentage of revenue comes from one general contractor, owner or developer, that can affect valuation and deal structure.

3 ARE YOUR FINANCIALS CLEAN?

Tax returns aren't enough. You need three to five years of proper financial statements, ideally reviewed by an outside CPA. More importantly, personal expenses need to be out of the business books. If the numbers don't hold up under scrutiny, the deal won't either.

A Quality of Earnings (Q of E) report from a reputable CPA firm is the gold standard. It reduces buyer risk, which increases what they're willing to pay.

4 DO YOU KNOW YOUR NUMBER?

Don't get caught up chasing EBITDA (Earnings Before Interest, Tax, Depreciation and Amortization) multiples you heard about secondhand. Instead, ask yourself what you actually need from the sale. Set that as your floor. Walk away if you can't hit it. Everything above it is a win.

For many family-owned contractors, the biggest question isn't just price; it's legacy. What happens to your people, your culture and your company name after the sale matters too. Not every buyer is the right fit.

5 DO YOU HAVE REPRESENTATION?

Private equity buyers do this every day. Most owners do it once. That's a big imbalance. Hire an M&A advisor or investment banker who knows the contractor market. Their fee is almost always recovered — and then some — in a better final offer. SMACNA Greater Chicago can be a good starting point for referrals to advisors with trades experience.

BOTTOM LINE

Whether you're five years away from retirement or simply exploring options, preparing your business now creates more flexibility later. The contractors commanding the strongest valuations today aren't just profitable; they're organized, scalable and built to operate beyond the owner.

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