

## Editorial: The Importance of Political Action Committees

By Katherine Setser, IIDA

Legislation is confusing business. It's been said that one should never see sausage or legislation made. Perhaps there is some truth in this, but for the most part, I have learned much over the past 17+ years of working on Tennessee's interior design legislation – and most of it has been fascinating. One of the most important lessons I've learned is this: to successfully pass legislation, it takes a multi-pronged approach to be heard by legislators. It takes *coalitions, lobbyists and political action committees* to be successful and *all three* must be appropriately leveraged. Perhaps the more important lesson, though, is this: those in opposition of a bill using these same tools in order to defeat it. That means the one who uses them most effectively usually wins.

**Coalition.** *def.* A temporary alliance for a combined political voice. When a group speaks with a single unified voice they are more likely to be heard. In November of 1990, the Tennessee Interior Design Coalition (TIDC) was formed. TIDC raises thousands of dollars each year to keep an eye on proposed legislation that may adversely affect interior designers and to propose legislation and other regulatory action that will benefit the profession and the public. These dollars must be used for grassroots efforts to reach their constituents – things like educating interior designers, the public, and others about the issues (website development, mailings, continuing education programs), and coordinating grassroots efforts of members. Funding for the coalition comes from various fundraisers (i.e., TIDC Luncheon), grants, and other donations.

**Lobbyist.** *def.* A person who represents an organization or coalition before the Legislature and who provides the important service of providing detailed information on issues to the Legislators and their staffs. Legislators can't know everything about every issue so they rely on trusted lobbyists to provide them with information about each side of an issue. A good lobbyist knows how the government works and is respected and trusted by the Legislators to provide them with accurate and honest information. TIDC's lobbyist, Don Baltimore, has represented Tennessee interior designers since 1988 and worked to successfully pass our existing title act in 1991 and make modifications to the bill in 1995. In Tennessee, annual lobbying fees are paid for by the various interior design associations (ASID, IIDA and IDS) as well as a contribution from the coalition itself.

**Political Action Committee (PAC).** *def.* A group formed to raise money to make contributions to the campaigns of political candidates whom support their cause. Coalitions and Lobbyists are prohibited by law from making contributions to legislative campaigns. In fact, only individuals or non-corporate entities (partnerships and sole proprietors) may donate to a PAC. It is through this funding (and the individual votes that a PAC represents) that candidates get elected. It is a critical part of the legislative process; it is a way for voters to ensure that candidates aligned with their cause get into office.

While this may seem a bit like a standard civics lesson, it is a lesson vital to our success this year. Don't get me wrong, interior designers have been made great progress to date in passing our legislation. However, we've been working at a distinct disadvantage; it's a little like working on 2 of 3 cylinders. We have formed a strong coalition – speaking with one voice for interior designers in the state. We have a well respected lobbyist working full-time on our behalf and have hired an additional lobbyist to assist in this upcoming critical session. Unfortunately, our PAC, is not well understood and even less well funded. TIDPAC (Tennessee Interior Design Political Action Committee) raises and distributes approximately \$2000 each year to candidates whom support our issues. Surprisingly, this \$2000 usually comes from the same 20 or so people every year. That's less than 2% of the interior designers supporting our issue! And our \$2000 annually pales in comparison to what our most vocal opponent spends every year: in excess of \$25,000. Our opposition also speaks with one, unified and clear voice. Our opposition also has a well known and well-respected lobbyist presenting their side of the issues to the Legislators. *It's not hard to predict the harder path to travel.*

So, what can you do? Start by contributing to TIDPAC. It's easy and your contributions are usually tax deductible. In September you will receive a mailing from TIDPAC to participate in its annual PAC campaign. Don't put that mailer aside. Act on it. You can also go to the TIDC website, [www.TIDC.org](http://www.TIDC.org) and donate online. Anytime. Any amount will help us reach our goal.