

# Raise Your Glass: Former NES leader, ICC Adviser Conover is Retiring



If Dave Conover were only remembered as one of the people who designed technology to bring fresh Coors beer east of the Mississippi for the masses, his legacy would have been secure.

Add to that a 40-year history of helping develop codes and policies, intertwining them with new technology and bearing the standard for all to see, and it's evident that in retirement, he leaves a body of work even more intoxicating.

Conover, former CEO of the National Evaluation Service (NES) and a longtime supporter of the International Code Council and its processors, put in his papers as of April 1.

"The easiest explanation is I'm retiring because I can," said Conover, most recently Senior Technical Advisor with Pacific Northwest National Laboratory. "But I want to do more than codes now. I want to continue my volunteer work; do some traveling and other projects with my wife."

A triathlete, Conover said he likely will oversee a few of those events, in addition to ramping up open water swimming races in St. Croix.

By Nick Reiher

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Sara Yerkes, ICC's Senior Vice President of Government Relations, said she knew pretty quickly Conover was a Type A personality when they started working together in 2001 prior to the consolidation of the Code Council.

"He would come in to work with his bicycle after riding all the way to D.C. from his home in Great Falls, Va.," she said of the nearly 20-mile trek. "We had a lot of fun. And I don't know what I would have done without him."

Yerkes now has a couple dozen people working with her in ICC's Governmental Affairs division. But in those early days, it was her and Conover and a handful of others charged with showing wary jurisdictions and federal agencies that joining up with the new code organization was in their best interest.

"Coming from NES, David was my technical support," Yerkes said. "I could ask him to give me some information to help me testify at a crucial hearing, and a few hours later, I would have a report that gave me the support I needed.

"We built a lot together."

At that point, Conover was able to draw from more than 30 years of experience in building safety. He had just come from a very successful stint as the first paid staff position of the NES as its CEO, before that group merged with the three legacy organizations



In 2005, Sara Yerkes hosted the ICC Government Relations group at her home for the Christmas holidays. Pictured, Dave and Louise Conover.

in forming the Code Council.

Before he was hired, Conover said NES was managed by those legacy organizations: Building Officials and Code Administrators International (BOCA), International Conference of Building Officials (ICBO), and the Southern Building Code Congress International (SBCCI).

"It was run like a homeowner's association, with each organization taking its turn managing NES," said Conover, who often uses analogies to make his points.

"Each of the organizations had their own evaluation service. For customers, getting an evaluation report that was national in scope was like going to a dentist to get drilled three different times."

They knew Conover was the right person for the job, said Tom Frost, who recently retired himself as ICC's Senior Vice President of Technical Services.

"Dave had a lot of enthusiasm," said Frost, then BOCA's Vice President of Engineering Services. "He always came prepared. And he was able to explain to building officials why NES was important."

In three years of marketing NES, Conover was able to expand the number of technology evaluation reports from 250 during the previous 20 years, to over 500—increasing revenues by 20 percent, and reducing fees by more than 30 percent.

All of that would not have been possible without the dedication of the legacy organizations and their staff, Conover said, many of whom work for ICC ES and IAS today.

Conover said he has been blessed to meet and work with those people ever since he got into the business. He decided to go into engineering at The Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C., because, he said, he had had enough of languages in high school. Oh, and he liked science and math.

While working nights on his master's in mechanical engineering, Conover spent his days as a project manager for Fruit Growers Express out of Alexandria, Va. There, he helped gain the eternal gratitude of future generations of college students and other beer connoisseurs east of the Mississippi River.

"The people from Coors wanted to find a way to keep their beer cold while it was shipped from Colorado east," Conover said. "They didn't want to build a brewery in the East, and they didn't want to spend the extra money for a refrigerated car. So we came up with one sufficiently insulated to keep it cool on the trip."

Following that victory, the American Gas Association in Arlington, Va., hired him in

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1976 as its Director of Codes and Standards. Still a relative newbie in the industry, Conover established and staffed an industry-wide committee, still active today, to develop and deploy codes and standards policies for the group.

“I had a lot of help,” he said, “a lot of really good help from so many wonderful colleagues in the code community.”

Conover moved on to become Technical Services Director for the National Conference of States on Building Codes and Standards. There, in part, he successfully managed a contract with the Department of Energy to develop building energy codes and secure their adoption and implementation in response to federal legislation.

In addition while at NCSBCS he helped found Codeworks, a venture startup focused on helping designers know exactly what code provisions applied to their projects and how to navigate state and local permitting and approval processes. Those efforts earned him a designation by ENR as one of their “marksman in the building industry” in 1989.

During nine years in his first stint with Pacific Northwest National Laboratory as a senior program manager, Conover convened a public/private team to develop and implement codes and standards to support fuel cell technology for buildings.

He also authored simplified criteria for ASHRAE/IES Standard 90.1-89 covering energy conservation in new commercial buildings, and successfully secured its adoption in national model codes and implementation at the federal, state and local level.

In 1998, a longtime friend called. Conover said he first met Billy Manning in 1977 at an SBCCI mid-year hearing. Twenty years later, Manning, whom Conover called “Grandpa,” was President of NES, and he needed help.

“Billy started getting contract work from the (Washington) D.C., crowd,” he said. “All of a sudden, NES had some fairly significant work. Because NES was an umbrella subsidiary of the legacy organizations, it made life easier for agencies such as the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development to have NES manage and facilitate doing the work and not show favoritism to one of the code organizations.”

“When I look at the five fingers on my hand representing the mentors in my career, Billy is certainly one of them. The NES ‘stock’ that went into the ICC in 2003 was a lot stronger than it would have been because of Billy Manning.”

As he looks back over his career, Conover said he is grateful for all the friends he’s made, many of whom he saw regularly at code hearings and seminars. “They all came to

be, what did they call them in ‘Casablanca,’ the usual suspects?”

He has few regrets; you can ask him about “SmartCodes,” a way to develop and deliver automated code compliance checking of building information models—an idea he believes was just a little ahead of its time, and still is out there for the taking.

But now, he looks forward to projects with his wife of 42 years, Louise, whom he says is pretty mechanically inclined, too. “She helped me with a project for the Porsche,” he said, “and she redid some of the electrical wiring in our house and oversaw the design and construction of a carport.”

There will be trips to see the “kids,” sons Mark, 38, a mechanical engineer stationed in Australia (with their only grandson), and Brian, 35, a financial counselor.

He’ll continue to volunteer at a local heart and vascular institute, and with fourth-graders in a Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) program. He especially loves working with young minds.

“They learn a few things from me,” he said, “and I learn a lot more from them. They can build video games on their laptops, for Pete’s sake!” **BSJO**

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