

Upbeat Mood at TRVA's 36th Annual Convention

August 20, 2009 by [Steve Bibler](#)



TRVA convention attendees included (from left) Amy Pennington, TRVA president; Bill Pearson, TRVA past president; Sen. Kirk Watson; and Andrea McWilliams, TRVA political consultant.

RV manufacturers, dealers, suppliers, lenders and campground owners each had their moment in the sun during the 36th [Texas RV Association](#) (TRVA) Annual Membership Convention held over the weekend at the Hyatt Regency Townlake in Austin, Texas.

"I was pleasantly surprised with everybody's attitude," said Clark McEwen, TRVA executive director. A sense of tension could have existed among the 150 attendees, he said, but what he found was "an upbeat feeling that, 'Yes, we're going into some difficult months but we will get through this sometime next year.'"

As members of an industry panel discussion, Don Clark, president of Dutchmen Manufacturing Inc., Goshen, Ind., and audience participant Claude Donati, vice president of Gulf Stream Coach Inc., Nappanee, Ind., brought encouraging news from the manufacturing sector, McEwen said.

McEwen said the thrust of their comments were three fold. First, they're working leaner than ever before. Second, they have concerns that when the market turns, will they be able to gear up production quickly enough. Finally, "They are pleased with Texas. We're certainly more stable than most of the country," McEwen said.

Indeed, Texas is now the nation's largest market for RVs. The state passed California last year and moved into the No. 1 spot in RV retail sales with 7.2% of the market and stands to hold down that spot again this year, he said.

With some 100 RV dealers nationwide going out of business in the past year, the manufacturers also talked about being more selective in choosing the dealers they work with in the future, McEwen said.

McEwen concluded that manufacturers and dealers might not make the same errors they made two or three years ago when times were better and sales were easier to make.

Mark Beecher, national sales and marketing manager for the Consumer Finance Group Bank of the West, updated his audience on financing.

“Nothing draws more attention right now than financing,” McEwen said, “and they (lenders) understand the pain the dealers are feeling.”

McEwen said Texas dealers, who comprise about a third of TRVA’s membership, didn’t express resentment toward Beecher and other lenders present and seem to believe the financial institutions are trying to help.

“They’re trying to open the lines of credit and lower interest rates on floorplans and trying to get people financed at a lower credit rating,” he said, summarizing Beecher’s talk. “But, again, we may not go back to where we were three years ago where anybody could buy anything. Everybody saw that as a wonderful period, rather than ask themselves, can it sustain itself.”

“Beecher does not want to walk away from the RV industry. They want healthy dealers, customers and buyers,” McEwen said.

TRVA also engaged in first-time roundtable discussions. On the style of a “20 Group” but smaller, these roundtables allowed TRVA members to sit down across the table with other Texas business people, sometimes competitors in their own market, and frankly discuss their business, McEwen said.

The feature proved to be successful and will be repeated next year, he said.

Campgrounds seem to be the one segment of the RV industry that has fared well throughout the recession, McEwen said, based on reports at the convention. Texans are taking shorter camping vacations, which means they’re staying in-state more. Destination parks are doing well and in some cases are exceeding their 2008 results, he said. State parks also report good seasons, he added.

On the down side, McEwen regrets that the manufacturer participation was not greater at the convention, but he understands the reasoning behind it. Texas had the strongest franchise laws in the country protecting RV dealers heading into 2009 and the state Legislature passed legislation this session, with TRVA’s support, that only strengthened those laws, he said.

The event concluded with the annual business meeting and election of officers Monday morning. New officers are: President, Steve Spearing, Crestview RV, Buda; Vice President, Dean Nelson, Professional Sales RV, Colleyville; Treasurer, Kevin Ketner, Ancira Motorhomes, Boerne; and Diana LeBlanc, PPL Motorhomes, Houston.