

The History of the WASHTO Gavel

Pre-2002 – The symbolic nature of passing the leadership from one individual to another has taken many forms over the years. Whether it involves a swearing in, crowning, or passing of an item of value, these leadership changes are important to any organization. Prior to 2002, WASHTO did not have an actual gavel to pass from President to President. Each past president was presented a plaque with a gavel on it representing their term in office.

2002 – 2003 – Sleeter Dover (Wyoming) is serving as WASHTO President and Michael Behrens (Texas) is serving as the Vice President. President Dover feels that WASHTO needs a symbol to commemorate the transition of leadership. He has observed that incoming President Mike Behrens walks each morning, exploring the cities of the various AASHTO and WASHTO meetings. During these walks, Behrens regularly finds rocks that interest him and brings them back home. An idea strikes President Dover and at the next WASHTO Annual Meeting in Salt Lake City in the summer of 2003, President Dover presents incoming President Behrens a large rock (about 12 inches long, 8 inches wide and 4 inches deep) that was taken from the Snake River in Wyoming as the new WASHTO Gavel. Thus, the tradition of the WASHTO Gavel begins.

2003 – 2004 – President Behrens believes that each President should add something to the gavel to commemorate their service as WASHTO President and he has the “new gavel” (a.k.a. “The Rock”) cored by the TxDOT Laboratory. The core was then polished and a handle attached; thereby creating a true gavel for WASHTO. The newly styled gavel was presented to incoming WASHTO President Tom Norton (Colorado) at the 2004 Annual Meeting in Kalispell, Montana.

2004 – 2005 – President Norton decides that the gavel needs an appropriate container to house it between meetings. The Colorado DOT staff crafts a new wooden box to hold the gavel. President Norton presents the gavel in its new wooden box to incoming President Dave Spryncznatyk (yes, that is the correct spelling) (North Dakota) at the 2005 Annual Meeting in Omaha.

2005 – 2006 – President Spryncznatyk decides to leave North Dakota’s mark on the new gavel tradition in the form of an elaborate fringed leather wrap placed on the handle to represent the Western and Native American Culture of North Dakota and the Western States. President Spryncznatyk presents incoming WASHTO President Victor Mendez (Arizona) the newly ornamented gavel at the 2006 Annual Meeting in Honolulu.

2006 – 2007 – President Mendez contemplates how he can best continue the gavel tradition and quickly realizes that the gavel is just ceremonial in its present condition. All gavels should have a block to strike against when conducting meetings. So, President Mendez has a sound block created for the WASHTO Gavel. President Mendez presents the gavel, its case and the new sound block to incoming President Gary Ridley (Oklahoma) at the 2007 Annual Meeting in Las Vegas, Nevada.

2007 – 2008 – Oklahoma, steeped in tradition, takes on the challenge to find something unique to add to the gavel legacy. While Colorado had done an outstanding job building a beautiful container for the gavel and sound block, President Ridley finds it a little cumbersome to carry. In addition, the box was constructed with a handle on the top of the box. During

transport, the handle was torn from the top causing damage to the lid. As their contribution, Oklahoma repaired the lid of the box by inseting a cross section of a Redbud limb and attached Redbud tree handles to the box to solve this problem. Oklahoma designated the Redbud as their State Tree in 1937. These Redbud handles add a piece of Oklahoma to the gavel’s history. President Ridley presents the gavel and its case with Redbud handles to incoming WASHTO President Rhonda Faught (New Mexico) at the 2008 WASHTO Annual Meeting in Portland, Oregon.

July 2008 – December 2008 – President Faught served only a short time as WASHTO President. Her term was cut short by plans for retirement. No matter the length of the term of office, the tradition must continue so President Faught added a piece of red velvet to the box and pinned a New Mexico Department of Transportation and a Roadrunner lapel pin to the velvet. The roadrunner, or chaparral, was designated the State Bird of New Mexico in 1949. President Faught passed the gavel to Vice President Will Kempton by United States Mail. President Kempton (California) became WASHTO President upon receiving this instrument of power.

January 2009 – July 2009 – President Kempton served with distinction as WASHTO President serving out the remaining 2008 to 2009 term. Shortly after his term as President expired, Will left his job at Caltrans and business kept him from attending the Annual WASHTO Meeting in Seattle, Washington. Kevin Hanley, serving as WASHTO Secretary, represented President Kempton and presented the gavel to incoming President Paula Hammond (Washington). It should be noted that nothing was added to the gavel at this time. Recognizing this oversight, California was contacted in 2011 to see if they wished to add something to the gavel history. On June 15, 2011, a Caltrans lapel pin was received and it was added to the red velvet to represent Will Kempton’s tenure as WASHTO president.

2009 – 2010 – President Hammond took office and, of course, wanted to leave her history with the gavel and astutely noticed that if the gavel was ever separated from its case, no one would know it was the WASHTO Gavel. Wanting to make sure everyone knew the gavel belonged to WASHTO; she had a gavel cap made that carried the WASHTO logo and name. President Hammond presented the WASHTO Gavel to incoming President Amadeo Saenz (Texas) at the 2010 Annual Meeting in Bismarck, North Dakota.

2010 – 2011 – With Texas having been involved at the beginning of the WASHTO Gavel’s history, it was important to make another large stride to enhance the WASHTO Gavel with all of its many improvements. Upon receiving the gavel, Texas noticed that the gavel was “packed” in the case with “bubble wrap.” This seemed to be unacceptable for the instrument symbolizing the prestigious leadership of WASHTO. Immediately, President Saenz tasked TxDOT employees to design and manufacture a suitable case modification to properly hold the gavel. Staff created the Texas Mesquite Gavel and Sound Block Nesting Blocks. These nesting blocks adequately secure the gavel in the case. During this time, Texas also replaced the plaques on the top of the box with ones that included the year in which each president served WASHTO. President Saenz presented the WASHTO Gavel to incoming President Francis Ziegler (North Dakota) at the 2011 Annual Meeting in Oklahoma City.