

ATA Addresses Key Issues at MCE

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Seth Clevenger | Managing Editor, Features and Multimedia

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Spear (from left), Sumerford and Garner Brumbaugh at the closing press conference Oct. 26. (John Sommers II for Transport Topics)

NASHVILLE, Tenn. — Trucking industry leaders addressed key challenges including a worsening labor shortage and supply chain bottlenecks and looked forward to a long-sought win on infrastructure funding during American Trucking Associations' 2021 Management Conference & Exhibition.

The annual meeting, held Oct. 23-26, convened in person at Nashville's Music City Center after switching to a virtual format last year due to the coronavirus outbreak.

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Although trucking companies continue to operate in an unsettled business environment, MCE 2021 marked another step toward normalcy for the industry after months of disruption.

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“Getting people back in the room is absolutely essential,” said ATA President Chris Spear. “This is a high-touch business. It does require face-to-face interaction.”

The annual conference, which included policy meetings, panel discussions, educational sessions and vendor exhibits, drew just shy of 2,500 attendees, he said.

While that was down slightly from the 2,700 who traveled to San Diego for MCE 2019, the last time the event was held in person, Spear said he was pleased with the attendance considering the lingering uncertainty caused by the pandemic.

Sherri Garner Brumbaugh, ATA’s immediate past chairman and CEO of Garner Trucking Inc. in Findlay, Ohio, reflected on how the federation continued its advocacy efforts during these unconventional times.

While not a substitute for in-person conversations, videoconferencing enabled industry leaders to remain connected without the benefit of large gatherings.

“The work continued. Our mission continued,” she said at MCE’s closing press conference.

ATA’s new chairman, Harold Sumner, CEO of J&M Tank Lines in Birmingham, Ala., also highlighted the value of meeting face-to-face at MCE, including the impromptu hallway meetings that only happen in person.

“To me, this is what it’s all about. It’s about the people and the friends,” he said.

As in years past, work was a major topic of discussion at MCE.

By a wide margin, the top concern was the American

Transportation Research Board followed by two other industry’s top concerns, attention and compensation.

ATA Chief Economist for shortage has increased to

80,000 due to factors such as the industry’s aging workforce and driver training schools temporarily closing during the pandemic.

The strained global supply chain was another important theme, with experts calling for closer cooperation among all modes of freight transportation to help ease the strain.

The bipartisan infrastructure bill in Congress, however, provided a major source of optimism.

Attendees talk on the exhibit floor on the final day of the conference. (John Sommers II for Transport Topics)

Spear expressed confidence that the bill ultimately will pass into law.

“I don’t think it’s a matter of if. It’s a matter of when,” he said. “It’s going to happen and it needs to happen.”

This “long overdue” investment in the nation’s roads and bridges would eliminate congestion, increase productivity, improve safety and reduce emissions, Spear said.



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MCE also offered a look at the latest equipment, technologies and other products designed to help trucking companies operate more efficiently, improve safety and ensure regulatory compliance.

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Suppliers of in-cab technology and fleet management software had a strong presence in the MCE exhibit hall, reflecting the industry's increasing adoption of technology for the truck and in the shop.

Truck makers, meanwhile, showcased zero-emission battery-electric trucks and, in some cases,

Multiple educational sessions focused on the emergence of electric trucks, as well as the latest



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