

A Legacy of Support

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By Daniel Cohen

It started with a shoebox.

Following a lengthy career at the U.S. Defense of Department (DoD) assisting communities and contractors coping with downsizing, John Lynch began his retirement in 1990 with the objective of turning what had been for many years a loose collection of local government officials responsible for redeveloping closed military bases into an independent organization able to promote the needs of base closure communities and provide technical support to its members.

Until that point, the National Association of Installation Developers (NAID) – the predecessor to the Association of Defense Communities (ADC) – had been supported financially by DoD’s Office of Economic Adjustment (OEA) and its primary activity was convening an annual meeting

Lynch began his volunteer effort working out of the office of George Schlossberg, who, like John, had just left a job working at the Pentagon. As the general counsel for OEA, Schlossberg had worked closely with John and was happy to provide him limited space at the law firm he had moved to.

Working out of Schlossberg’s office, Lynch reached out to NAID members to craft a policy agenda for the association and start a series of technical publications. Initially, John kept all of his NAID paperwork in a banker’s box in Schlossberg’s office. “I have all of NAID in my shoebox,” he would tell colleagues, recounted Schlossberg, who now is ADC’s legal counsel.

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Lynch’s work in the early 1990s organizing communities responding to a base closure, launching a dialogue with DoD by providing a voice for communities and spurring Congress to modify the BRAC process to consider the needs of defense communities turned ADC into the independent organization it is today, according to the community leaders who worked with him during that period.

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In the months following Lynch's death last December at the age of 81, the colleagues and community representatives he worked with remembered an individual who devoted his career to supporting communities striving to recover from base closures and cutbacks in defense spending.

He was a pioneer in the field of defense conversion and "a walking encyclopedia" of information about the BRAC process for closure communities, said Patrick O'Brien, who worked with Lynch at OEA before becoming the agency's director.

"John was an extraordinary guy," said Michael Houlemard, who started working on the redevelopment of Fort Ord, Calif., in the 1990s before becoming the executive officer of the Fort Ord Reuse Authority.

He had the perfect personality for helping local leaders through the struggle of not knowing what was going to happen to their community following an announced base closure.

Lynch was able to convince local leaders to stop focusing on the loss resulting from a base closure and, instead, embrace the opportunity to shape their region's future, added Jeffrey Simon, who first met Lynch when he was working for the commonwealth of Massachusetts in the mid-1980s trying to help five communities address base closures from the previous decade.

"I just appreciated and admired him," Simon said.

SETTING A FOUNDATION FOR NAID

ADC's roots stem from a series of conferences first held in 1976 among airport managers at former military facilities in the Midwest. OEA helped to support those annual meetings, a role spearheaded by the agency's Wally Bishop. Bishop was OEA's primary liaison to NAID during the organization's first decade in existence, while Lynch played a supporting role.

By the time the first BRAC round occurred in 1988, he dedicated more time to working with the fledgling organization in an effort to jump start a dialogue between affected communities and DoD leadership.

"That dialogue didn't exist prior to 1988," recounted Bill Laubernds, who at the time was working on the reuse of Kincheloe Air Force Base in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. "He got DoD to understand the need for a program to assist communities," Laubernds said.

After leaving OEA, John accelerated his efforts to organize NAID members, with the aim of helping closure communities better understand the base reuse process and pushing changes to ease communities' recovery from closures. Lynch established an agenda for NAID to accomplish those goals, something that the organization didn't have prior to that time.

He understood that improving the base closure process to benefit affected communities would require working with the Pentagon to revise its process for carrying out base closures and lobbying Congress to update the BRAC statute. That prompted a "seismic shift in the organization," Laubernds said. Many members of NAID's board were not convinced the association should be taking on that role.

"A lot of people just didn't view the organization as supposed to be more proactive," Laubernds said. "He changed the direction of NAID."

In advocating for defense communities, Lynch made certain that NAID did not take a stand on whether subsequent BRAC rounds were justified, noted Houlemard. Instead, he focused on adopting positions that would strengthen communities.

"He kept us out of being attacked," Houlemard said. Lynch strived to maintain NAID's focus on its core mission of ensuring communities would not unduly bear the brunt of DoD actions, he said.

One of the most important changes to DoD's BRAC implementation process Lynch helped spur in the 1990s was the requirement for the federal government to consider a community's reuse plan when disposing of a closed installation, Laubernds said.

"He understood that Washington couldn't tell a community what to do; it had to be the local community that supported the plan," he said.

Another policy he fought for was the creation of the economic development conveyance, allowing communities to obtain former base property at below market cost for the purpose of generating jobs.

"We were able to accomplish quite a bit. ... There were a lot of improvements," Laubernds said.

"I view him [John] as the key guy that took NAID from an organization with limited [capabilities] to an organization that could really make a difference and influence the process," he said.

To fully appreciate how far ADC has come since its formative years, Schlossberg said, “[You need to remember] how fragile things were with the organization. To get a meeting in the Pentagon was not an easy thing because no one had heard of NAID,” he said.

NAID HELPS COMMUNITIES THROUGH BRAC’S EARLY ROUNDS

Beyond the dialogue NAID forged with DoD and Congress, the association also helped communities navigate the BRAC process in the 1990s when DoD held three BRAC rounds.

“John envisioned NAID as a resource for communities to deal with multi-faceted problems they had no experience in,” said Paul McCarthy, who was the Glenview, Ill., village manager when the BRAC Commission voted to shutter Naval Air Station Glenview.

The association allowed community leaders from across the nation facing similar challenges to learn from each other. “John saw a need ... and NAID grew as a consequence,” McCarthy said. “I got on the board of directors because I saw the organization as a real asset.”

NAID’s growth soon dictated the organization hire a full-time staff member, especially as John outgrew the file cabinet in Schlossberg’s office. After retaining an executive director for two years, NAID’s board decided the organization could benefit from professional management, and in the mid-1990s it entered into a management contract with a Washington, D.C.-based trade association.

“This served the organization well for a number of years,” said Christine Shingleton, who served on NAID’s board starting in the mid-1990s, including one year as president.

Lynch played a significant part in determining what direction the association should take as it looked to hire an outside organization to support its growth, noted Shingleton, who led the redevelopment of the former Marine Corps Air Station Tustin, Calif., as Tustin’s assistant city manager.

“Before then, it was just a bunch of volunteers, kept together by John,” Schlossberg said.

“He had a way of engaging people one on one or in groups in a selfless way.”

Many former NAID board members recounted Lynch’s passion for producing technical reports aimed at disseminating successful approaches to base redevelopment. John assumed the role of editor, identifying members to write individual chapters to use their

experience as a case study or to make use of their expertise.

“His belief was, ‘We don’t have to reinvent the wheel ... we can look around at good practices and let other communities take advantage of that,’” said Simon.

At the same time, Lynch had a way of getting NAID members to contribute to the publications. “John had a certain selfless volunteer attitude, always encouraging people to do more outreach,” Schlossberg said.

“That was all John,” Simon said of the series of technical reports NAID produced.

Lynch’s contribution to defense communities came in a variety of forms. Houlemard recounted how John would interact with community leaders at NAID’s winter conference at the Tempe Mission Palms in Tempe, Ariz., listening to their struggles in an attempt to offer advice.

“He had a way of engaging people one on one or in groups in a selfless way,” Houlemard marveled. “He would always work behind the scenes.”

Even as Lynch’s role with NAID began to wane by the end of the 1990s, his influence remained, Houlemard said.

“John Lynch was always there, anything we did we would always check back with him,” he remembered.

Tim Ford, CEO of ADC, tells a similar story about his early encounters with Lynch.

“While John’s leadership with NAID diminished in the late-1990s, that is when I actually began my interaction with him,” Ford said. “From the late 1990s all the way through BRAC 2005, John took a lead role guiding NAID’s publications. He ran a very tight ship. And while staff often groaned about John’s arrival in the office because it usually meant more work, he was quietly teaching us the business of base redevelopment. More importantly, he was sharing his knowledge with all communities through a series of publications that become the gold standard for all BRAC communities.”

SHAPING DoD’S ECONOMIC ADJUSTMENT PROGRAM

Lynch’s role in spearheading NAID into an independent organization was really the second chapter in a life’s work devoted to helping communities respond to defense drawdowns.

His interest in defense conversion started early, as it was the subject of the dissertation he wrote for the Ph.D. in economics he earned from Syracuse University. The topic typically examines the plight of manufacturers forced to respond to cutbacks in defense spending, but John was equally interested in helping communities revitalize closed military bases.

The research Lynch completed for his dissertation made him a pioneer in the field starting in the late 1970s and positioned him as an expert in the topic through the 1990s, said O'Brien, who joined OEA in the late 1980s when Lynch was an associate director for the agency. While at OEA, John wrote several books on defense conversion.

"If you were doing anything [in this field], John was probably part of your network," O'Brien said.

More so than the assistance he offered to communities coping with base closures starting in the 1970s, Lynch's most lasting contribution to defense communities may be the part he played in establishing the Pentagon's economic adjustment program, the federal effort coordinated by OEA to help states and communities recover from cutbacks in defense procurement and base closures or realignments.

He saw the need for a DoD office dedicated to supporting communities, workers and contractors hurt by defense retrenchment, as well as for a broader federal effort to supplement the department's resources, O'Brien explained. Lynch also understood how such a federal program should be structured and where the resources would come from. His vision helped change "the mindset in the building [Pentagon]," O'Brien said, and culminated in the executive order President Jimmy Carter issued in 1978 establishing the economic adjustment program.

"He was actually the forefather for what we know today as the economic adjustment program," O'Brien said.

Lynch also was heavily involved in helping OEA evolve from its initial conception to a field agency, "not just delivering technical support but going into the field and delivering results," he said. "He was a catalyst for much of what happened back then."

Despite his oversized contribution to the field of economic adjustment in general, and to defense communities in particular, Lynch was very humble, according to his colleagues. Many of the people Lynch worked with were not even aware he had a Ph.D.

Simon recalled Lynch's humility when ADC presented him its Senator David Pryor Special Achievement Award during its annual conference in 1998. He had not been told ahead of

time about the honor, the only award ADC confers that requires approval of its board of directors.

“I remember how stunned he was,” Simon said, but no one else in attendance was. “He was the only one who was stunned.”

Editor’s note: In memory of the legacy of our longtime friend and colleague, John Lynch, ADC has renamed one of its annual awards in his name. Beginning this year, base closure communities recognized for significant achievement will be honored with the John Lynch Base Redevelopment Excellence Award.
