

Pawlaczyk helps Walmart stay in front

ACEC/A's new president is a Michigan native who now calls Arkansas home and helps the world's largest retailer expand its offerings.

When Walmart is planning a new offering or service, CEI's Steve Pawlaczyk, P.E., sometimes knows about it sooner than most people – including his co-workers and his wife.

Pawlaczyk, 49, has been in charge of CEI's Walmart program since 2010, when he came to Arkansas from his home state of Michigan. He also manages CEI's office in Fresno, California.

Pawlaczyk has helped design at least 20 of Walmart's pickup areas in recent years. He helped design the first, a standalone location on Walton and J Streets. Buildings must be reconfigured and parking lots redesigned to ensure enough parking spaces are available. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated that work.

"At the beginning, we were kind of wondering, are we going to stay busy? Are clients going to put things on hold? But it never really slowed down for us," he said.

CEI is helping Walmart design its new corporate campus in Bentonville. That work includes designing stormwater pollution prevention plans. It's also helping the prime contractor, Walter P. Moore, navigate the company and the community.

Other recent projects he's been involved with have included Walmart's health clinic in Springdale and a drone launching pad at the Pea Ridge store.

When he arrived at CEI, he managed Walmart's Arkansas projects such as new parking lots. After about a year, he started doing site selection, design and construction work for new stores in Arkansas, including Neighborhood Market grocery stores. CEI is helping the retailer as it backfills new fuel stations at existing stores.

"We're kind of their protoengineer, meaning if they're doing a program, they'll have us help write the guidelines, do the prototype plans, what they want the ideal site to look like," he said.



Asked about the privacy expected when working with the world's largest retailer, Pawlaczyk said, "There's things I can't even talk to people here at CEI and let them know what's going on. ... Once it goes public or once we submit to the city, that sort of thing, and it becomes public knowledge, I can share that stuff, but no, I don't even share it with my wife."

Pawlaczyk said he enjoys working with Walmart because "They give us a lot of responsibility, and they pretty much let us do our job."

"The nice thing about them is, they may slow down like they are from a new store program, but they're always doing something," he later said. "They're always trying to tweak and change and stay relevant, and stay ahead of Amazon in terms of total dollars and revenue and sales."

As this year's ACEC/A chairman, Pawlaczyk said his top goal during this

nonlegislative year is gaining membership. The best way to do that is for firms to reach out to other firms. CEI subcontracts geotechnical work to Building and Earth Sciences. Pawlaczyk encouraged branch manager Joe Vistad, P.E., to join ACEC/A, which it did after Executive Director Angie W. Cooper closed the deal.

"[Engineering firms] are competitors like you say, but trying to get people to recognize if we join together, we'll advance our industry that much more," he said. "Instead of cannibalizing each other, fighting each other, undercutting each other pricewise, we'll do better if we promote our industry rather than tear each other down."

Pawlaczyk grew up in Oxford, Michigan, a small town about an hour north of Detroit. His dad was a surveyor who had worked his way up to executive vice president in a company that was similar to

CEI. Pawlaczyk would help him do survey work on the weekend. Between the eighth and ninth grades, he started doing hand drafting, and he would work for the company as a summer intern.

“So I pretty much knew going into high school and into college what I was going to do,” he said. “I loved what I did there, and so I just pursued a civil engineering degree.”

Pawlaczyk believes the engineering industry will continue to grow. The challenge will be finding people to fill all the roles. Current engineers can help recruit future engineers to the profession.

“When I was in high school and kids were talking about what they’re going to do, I’d say, ‘I’m going to be a civil engineer,’ and most kids had no idea what that was,” he said. “Trying to educate that next generation into understanding what we do and why it’s important and how we do things. ...

“People don’t necessarily think much about civil engineers unless there’s a

problem. There’s potholes in the road, or drainage isn’t working, cars are flooded because the parking lot flooded, that type of thing. Getting them to understand that this is a worthwhile career, and it’s something that can help make the country and the planet better.”

He graduated from Lawrence Technological University with a Bachelor’s Degree in Civil Engineering. His future wife, Nikki, was a year behind him in high school and graduated with an electrical engineering degree from the same university on the same scholarship. They married after his senior year. He worked for a couple of engineering firms and then spent 11 years doing mostly retail site development at what is now Atwell, becoming an office manager and branch manager.

Work in Michigan was slowing. The auto industry was struggling, land development had shut down, and they figured they would have to move out of state. A recruiter called and asked what he

thought of Arkansas. He hadn’t thought much about the state, but he came here for a couple of interviews at CEI.

“That was a good fit for me because Walmart’s kind of like the Holy Grail for land development engineers because they get us involved right from the beginning,” he said.

There were some adjustments to be made. After playing high school and college hockey in Michigan, he figured his playing days were over after he moved to Arkansas. One day he was having dinner with his boss and his wife when she mentioned that the Jones Center in Springdale had an ice rink. That’s when he got back into the sport. He played defense when he was younger but now is a forward, and he coached his son’s team.

He and Nikki have three children: Nathan, 18; David, 16; and Karlie, 14. Nathan and Karlie share a birthday on Dec. 14. Nikki owns Capture Me Photography by Nicole and takes wedding, real estate and sports team photos.

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