
By Amanda L. Blyth

The Steel Industry's Largest Living Room Conversation:

AIST's Town Hall Forum Turns Twenty





“The Forum’s annual theme appropriately resonates the sentiments of the industry and offers a platform to the business leaders to communicate their vision to a large and relevant audience. Candid discussions on safety, trade issues, innovation, market forces and perception of the industry make this event much sought-after during the AISTech conference.”

**— Anand Sen,
President TQM and Steel
Business, Tata Steel Ltd.
(2013 Panelist)**

The AISTech Town Hall Forum is turning 20 this year. What started as an idea to bring industry executives together in a “living room”-style conversation has become one of AIST’s signature events at its annual conference and exposition. The Forum has seen dozens of steel industry executives from around the world grace its stage. *Iron & Steel Technology* recently spoke with AIST executive director Ronald Ashburn, Town Hall Forum chair George Koenig of Phoenix Services, moderator Jon Delano, and a few past panelists about the Forum’s history and the behind-the-scenes preparation required to make the event happen each year.

The inaugural Town Hall Forum was held during the Iron & Steel Society’s (ISS) ISSTech 2003. Moderated by late Chicago broadcaster John Callaway, more than 1,000 people attended the standing-room-only event. The original lineup included Keith Ascough of SMS Demag Inc., Keith Busse of Steel Dynamics Inc., Michael J. Douglas of Praxair Metals Technologies, Steve Miller of Bethlehem Steel Corp., Joseph Rutkowski of Nucor Corp., Clyde Selig of SMI Steel – Texas and Peter Southwick of Ispat Inland Inc.

George Koenig, the Town Hall’s chair and, for all intents and purposes, founder, came up with the idea to bring the executives together for the Forum in 2002 as a way to figure out how to rescue the industry from a period of uncertainty, bankruptcies and consolidations. With the support of a few members of the ISS board of directors, he quickly started bringing people on board.





2004

“I had the idea of getting the executives out of the board room and in front of the members, so that they could hear firsthand what’s going on and what’s happening in the inner workings,” Koenig said.

After ISS merged with the Association of Iron and Steel Engineers (AISE) in 2004, Koenig and AIST’s then-newly minted executive director Ronald Ashburn decided to make the Forum an annual, and integral, part of AISTech.



2008

“U. S. Steel supported it, Nucor Steel supported it, Steel Dynamics, everybody supported it,” Koenig explained. “Then Ron pushed to make sure we had full industry participation, including international representation.”

“The success of it today is because of AIST and Ron,” Koenig said.

“Each year, we take a disciplined approach to research steel-related challenges and opportunities, and to recruit key leaders for the panel to discuss how best to move the industry forward,” Ashburn replied.

The Forum’s moderator, Jon Delano of KDKA-TV in Pittsburgh, said, “The steel industry is one of the most dynamic,



2013



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on a virtual platform. The panelists that year included David Burritt of United States Steel Corporation, Lourenco Goncalves of Cleveland-Cliffs Inc., Mark Millett of Steel Dynamics Inc., Dan Needham of Nucor, and David Stickler of Big River Steel.

In that discussion, much of the focus was on the changing landscape of the steel industry in light of the Cleveland-Cliffs acquisition of ArcelorMittal USA's steelmaking assets, which had just been announced.

That, essentially, is what the Forum is all about – the leaders of the industry gathering to talk about what's going on in the

ever-changing high-tech industries in the world today. That means it is never difficult keeping the Town Hall both timely and relevant each year, as long as we continue to focus on the changes that make this industry so exciting.”

Over the years, 40 steel-producing and steel-related companies have been represented in the Forum. What started as a frank sit-down about the survival of the industry transformed over time into a discussion of opportunities and technological advancements.

The event experienced a logistical shift in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, when it was held



2011



industry and where it's headed. And while it is customary to see CEOs on the panel, the event presents a unique opportunity for up-and-coming management personnel.

Reflecting on changes in the panel over the years, Ashburn said, "What I see is a total transformation of the leadership. Through the last two decades, it has been very satisfying to see the next generation step up to the plate and lead the steel industry to a brighter future."

Two panelists, such as 2019–2020 AIST president Jim Dudek of United States Steel Corporation and AIST officer-at-large Brian Bishop of Cleveland-Cliffs, brought fresh perspectives that distinguished them among the veteran participants.

"It was really fun to be a spokesperson for the industry," Bishop told *Iron & Steel Technology*. "It was an honor to be asked to be on the panel."



"My favorite part of the Town Hall Forum is really just getting the whole industry together in a room and to have the thought leaders on the stage, and having the opportunity to embrace questions and see perspectives. As a young engineer, I would come to this event, and it was always interesting to see what people had to share; what things I should be looking at in the future; and what things our company should be doing."

**— Barry Schneider,
Senior Vice President, Flat Roll Steel Group, Steel Dynamics Inc.
(2019, 2021 Panelist)**



2012



2014

The preparation for the event is a months-long process. The two hours participants spend on stage is the result of rigorous planning and preparation. Countless hours of research, meetings and interviews go into prepping each of the panelists as well as the moderator.



2016



“Doing the prep work certainly helps you get your thoughts collected on what you’re going to talk about,” said Brian Bishop, who participated in the 2021 Town Hall.

“But as you’re going through the discussion, the discussion kind of shapes itself and oftentimes you get off topic a little bit, but that adds to the realism and gets down to what people really want to hear.”

Barry Schneider of Steel Dynamics Inc. echoed this sentiment.

“The preparation is real! I didn’t want to get caught with my feet in the sand on something, I wanted to understand perspectives, so I actually spent a couple of months ahead of time [preparing],” he said.

Delano also spends considerable time preparing for the day of the event.

“Preparing for the AIST Town Hall Forum is one of the most enjoyable parts of the program because I spend an hour alone with each of the panelists,” he said.



“While we often talk about the past at the Town Hall, I try to keep us attuned to the future. What is the next big development is key, and, believe me, every year I am surprised by something one of our panelists says. I like

panelists who are smart, sharp and opinionated, and they always deliver! That’s key to the success of every AIST Town Hall Forum.”

**— Jon Delano,
Town Hall Forum Moderator**



“Months before the program, I meet with George Koenig, Ron Ashburn and the excellent AIST staff to update myself on the latest happenings in the steel industry,” Delano continued.

Delano has the monumental task of pulling all of the individual panelists’ areas of expertise – and the latest headlines – into an informative and entertaining event each year.

Since its inception, the Forum has nearly always included a representative from the steel supplier community in its lineup.

“Having a supplier perspective represents a unique aspect for this event,” Ashburn explained. “Steel producers and technology suppliers are fully interdependent, and the success of the industry depends on respecting and cultivating this key relationship.”

“The Forum offers a good balance to this perspective,” he continued.

Lee Morgan of The Systems Group shared his experience from being the supplier representative on the 2021 Forum.



2017



2018

“It was a pretty awesome experience having the leaders of our customers up there,” Morgan said.

“There were some questions that I couldn’t address, but a lot of the questions I could talk about servicing the steel industry and helping keep them healthy. So it was a great experience.”

We hope you’ll join us for our all-CEO Town Hall Forum at AISTech 2022 in Pittsburgh, Pa., USA, on 18 May. The Town Hall Forum is open to all registered AISTech 2022 attendees, students and exhibitors, whether in person or virtual. Visit [AISTech.org](https://www.aistech.org) to see this year’s panelists, as well as a complete list of all THF panelists from 2003 to 2022. ♦



2020



2021