

Water Technology

An Interview with Dean Ambaus,
President and Chief Executive Officer, The Water Council



Lobby of the Global Water Center in Milwaukee, Wisconsin

EDITORS' NOTE Dean Ambaus has served in his current post since March 2010. His diverse, 30-year background in multiple sectors encapsulates a wide range of expertise in government relations, branding, fundraising, economic development, and nonprofit management in Washington, D.C. and Madison, Wisconsin. Ambaus has also served as the President of *The Spirit of Milwaukee*, which is dedicated to enhancing Milwaukee's image, as well as the President of Forward Wisconsin, the state's economic development organization, and Executive Director of the Wisconsin Sesquicentennial Commission.



Dean Ambaus

ORGANIZATION BRIEF The mission of *The Water Council* (thewatercouncil.com) is to align the regional freshwater research community and water-related industries to establish the Milwaukee region as a World Water Hub for economic development, water research, and education.

What is the vision behind The Water Council?

We are an economic development organization – pure and simple. At day's end, we are about growing our current businesses, starting up new businesses, and attracting companies from across the world that focus on dealing with water issues. We look to utilize that technology not only in Wisconsin but globally.

Our roots go back seven or eight years when the Milwaukee region was going through an economic development effort and trying to coalesce its resources.

As part of that process, we took a close look at identifying the core industries. The conclusion was no big surprise, but the fact that we had such a strength in water technology caught our interest. We originally thought there were 50 businesses but found that there were actually more than 150 companies.

Those companies go back decades but it was more than an industry; there were also academic programs and research at the universities that made our potential for water technology development very unique.

At the outset, we worked to figure out who our competitors were, and there was no other area in the U.S. that had this core combination of both industry and academia. Then we looked at it from a global standpoint and still only found a handful were comparable.

Now we believe we're probably in the top three in the world when it comes to water technology.

What advantage does Wisconsin have in this area?

Our foundation comes from access to a lot of water. The name Milwaukee is a Native American word that means "gathering place by the water."

The Native Americans came here and discovered rivers and lakes to enable farming and fishing. The French and Germans came because of access to water and started the brewing industries.

So while we're rooted in water, the industries we're talking about today were, and continue to be, the suppliers to those water users – the pumps, meters, valves, heaters, and fixtures that are critical to help that industry work.

The availability of water obviously gave us the advantage, but what separates us is our history and experience in knowing how to work with water.

Another advantage is the research on freshwater that has been going on here for more than 40 years, especially at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

What have you done to gain recognition in the industry as an economic development organization?

The key is to keep reinforcing our industry leadership by involving very large corporations – from A. O. Smith, Badger Meter and Rockwell to Siemens, GE, and Veolia – that on a global scale are all dealing with aspects of water.

There are others within the U.S. who want to duplicate what we're doing here, but their emphasis is more on the environmental path. This is fine, but what separates us is our established industry focus and how we're starting up new companies.

One of the most notable objectives we accomplished was the opening of the Global Water Center in September 2013. It is an old seven-story, 98,000-square-foot warehouse that is devoted entirely to the water technology business and to accelerating new companies.

We have 10 or 12 entrepreneurs in the building, as well as the big established companies and university researchers all involved with commercialization of their work.

We don't know of any other place in the world where you have an accelerator that is focused on one industry with multiple-size companies and academic programs. Many incubators are all start-ups and only have their mentors come in

once a month. Here, the mentors work every single day, helping to create dynamic change.

Are you looking to expand the scope of your international activities?

Our Leadership Vision follows our current activities by repositioning The Water Council as an international organization that is headquartered in Milwaukee. We host delegations here once every few weeks.

Among our most important focuses is to help our entrepreneurs grow their businesses, and to attract entrepreneurs from around the world to come through our program.

We also have a responsibility to address water issues in other parts of the world such as China, India, and Africa.

We have reengineered the organization to continue to be an economic development group that is helping our businesses grow, while also taking on the responsibility of helping other areas of the world get access to clean water.

Is the purpose of the Water Summit you conduct to bring international thought leaders together?

Yes, and this year will be an especially noteworthy one because we have attracted a new partner with the International Water Association.

Their board of directors has scheduled their board meeting in conjunction with our Water Summit. We have many of the top water leaders in the world scheduled to be in Milwaukee to talk to attendees about their various programs.

How do you measure success in your efforts?

Jobs are important but there are factors in hiring that can sway one way or another that we can't necessarily impact.

On the other hand, we are transforming neighborhoods – the physical changes that we have seen around the Global Water Center are apparent.

We also want a hand in growing the number of patents. This is something we can control better than job creation – we can create an environment for coming up with solutions, which will then create jobs.

Are there adequate resources available to accomplish and further broaden your activities?

Money is always important, but so is having the right talent.

As a state, we are only going to be as strong as the rock solid companies that are here, and a magnet for other businesses who are looking to come here. ●