

Q&A

Jim Tozzi on creating OIRA, playing jazz for drunk tourists

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Jim Tozzi, head of the Center for Regulatory Effectiveness, is known for helping to create the Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs. Administrative Conference of the United States

If you're looking to talk to someone in Washington about regulations without getting bored, look no further than Jim Tozzi.

The 79-year-old spent two decades in the federal government, leaving an indelible stamp on the way agencies issue new regulations.

Under President Carter, Tozzi helped create the Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs, a unit of the Office of Management and Budget that he later led.

Now head of the Center for Regulatory Effectiveness, Tozzi peppers conversations about wonky regulatory matters with jokes and asides about everything from Washington politics to his "saint" of a wife.

Tozzi recently sat down with E&E News to discuss his impact on the rulemaking process, his thoughts on Congress' efforts to pass a regulatory reform measure and his past life as a jazz musician.

When you were younger, you spent time playing jazz in New Orleans. What was that like?

They started a very famous jazz hall down there called Preservation Hall. When they started it, I went down there. And there, I saw some of the greatest jazz musicians in the world. So I played, and the more I hung with them, the better I got. But I was never in their league. I played the last set, when most of the tourists were drunk.

I was pretty sure that I was not going to make it as a professional jazz musician. But it was a lovely life. And if I had stayed, I would've been dead a long time ago.

After you quit that lifestyle, how did you enter the federal government?

Luckily, I ended up going into the Army, and they put me over in the Corps of Engineers program. I was fascinated by the government. Once I got there, I never left the government.

How did you come to work on regulatory matters like cost-benefit analysis?

Benefit-cost analysis actually started in the Corps of Engineers. The corps did all of these detailed analyses of projects to see if the benefits exceeded the costs.

One day, I was sitting there, and a visiting professor named Al Schmid walked in. He said, "I think we should apply benefit-cost analysis to regulations." Our whole group was dumbfounded. He went away and wrote a paper on this. It went up to the Hill, and it got buried in some congressional report. But it stuck in my mind. Like a bad dream, it would come back every once in a while.

Eventually, I said, "Oh, this is really important." So the Army Corps of Engineers started doing benefit-cost analysis for regulations. OMB noticed that we were doing this, and they encouraged it.

From the Army Corps of Engineers, you moved to OMB, where you were instrumental in the creation of OIRA. What was that like?

There was a decrepit, old act called the Federal Reports Act. I helped clean that thing up and dress it up and call it the Paperwork Reduction Act. It would establish OIRA.

Time was running out, and the Paperwork Reduction Act got to President Carter's desk right after he lost the election. The next morning, I ran over to the White House. I was sure he was going to veto it. But he signed it. And that's how OIRA got started.

You left OMB to found the Center for Regulatory Effectiveness. Was it daunting to leave the government and strike out on your own?

Oh, my God, yes, it was. It was miserable at first.

The Center for Regulatory Effectiveness analyzes regulatory reform measures proposed by Congress. What do you think of the highest-profile such measure, the "Regulatory Accountability Act"?

My position is that I'm not against it, but I'm not for passage of it at this time. I'd rather see the administration really implement a regulatory budget.

How do you like living and working in the Washington area?

Washington is fascinating because the people here have interesting jobs. My office is in Dupont Circle, and there are a lot of NGOs [nongovernmental organizations] around there. I don't know of any other city in the United States where you could just stop someone on the street and ask them what they do, and they'd have an interesting job.

My wife doesn't like it, but when I go to a party in Washington, I do a very bad thing. The first question I ask is, "Where do you work?"

What is your wife like?

My wife is a saint. For 20 years, I never ate dinner with my family during the week. Maybe five times in 20 years. She raised the kids and did everything for 20 years. She's just been a great soldier.

What are your kids like?

I have a son who's an attorney in Birmingham, Ala. And my daughter works in the government here in D.C.

What do you do for fun?

For fun, I hang out with jazz musicians. Outside of my work or my company, I don't hang out with lobbyists, politicians or regulatory nerds. I hang out with musicians.

This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity.

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