

Redefining the Market: STA's 92nd Annual Conference Anticipates Industry Evolution

Earlier this month, STA's 92nd Annual Market Structure Conference convened in Washington, D.C., under a title that captured both the urgency and optimism of the moment: *Redefining the Market*. Across two days of onstage content, industry leaders and regulators examined how structural reform, technology and collaboration are reshaping the foundations of U.S. markets.

From the opening remarks to the final panel, the message was clear – change is inevitable, and progress must be built to stay ahead of the game.

Paul Atkins: Future-Proofing the SEC

SEC Chairman Paul Atkins' fireside chat set the tone for the conference. Now six months into his tenure, Atkins emphasized the importance of future-proofing rulemaking to ensure stability across administrations: "We don't want a ping-pong approach where every new SEC administration undoes what the previous one did. That's why we seek consensus on rules."

Atkins framed his agenda around creating durable, principle-based regulations that can adapt to innovation rather than react to it. He cited the need to revisit the Order Protection Rule – what he called the "order discrimination rule" – and to harmonize oversight between the SEC and the CFTC, arguing that "no-man's-land" overlap has stifled useful products in the past.

Atkins also pointed to the shrinking pool of public companies as a critical challenge to market vitality. "The stock market is top-heavy," he said. "There are half as many public companies now as there were 30 years ago. Why? Private markets are great, but it used to be cool to be public. So what happened? Three things: litigation, overwhelming costs of reporting, and the weaponization of corporate governance."

Finally, beyond specific regulatory priorities, Atkins stressed the importance of engagement with market participants to guide policy. "You discern for us where to go and where the pain points are," he said. "The Administrative Procedure Act works. Notice and comment are critical – you shouldn't have a machine-gun approach to rulemaking."

Robert Cook: Modernizing from the Ground Up

Where Atkins focused on long-term reform, FINRA President and CEO Robert Cook outlined a more immediate modernization agenda through his organization's FINRA Forward initiative. He described a comprehensive effort to simplify and update rules, reduce compliance burdens and make regulation "fit for purpose" in today's marketplace.

Cook pointed to the Consolidated Audit Trail as one area in need of recalibration: "CAT costs have gotten large. I am grateful that the new SEC leadership is engaged on this and is really exercising strong leadership in pushing this to happen."

He also announced that FINRA's Trade Reporting Facility will soon align with the SIP's expanded market hours. "We will be announcing soon the effective date for our TRF, matching the current SIP hours," he said. "And then going forward, as the SIP moves to expand its hours, we will move in tandem."

Cook's remarks offered a practical complement to Atkins' strategic vision. Together, they represented two sides of a similar modernization effort – one focused on building durable, long-term foundations, the other on executing operational improvements to strengthen confidence in day-to-day market function.

24-Hour Trading: Transforming Access

That shared commitment to modernization extended into new territory with a panel on 24-hour trading, exploring how the U.S. stock market could evolve toward continuous access. Representatives from Blue Ocean Technologies, Charles Schwab, and Nasdaq broke down how expanded hours are already gaining traction, driven by global demand and investor expectations shaped in part by crypto's 24/7 model.

Panelists agreed that around-the-clock trading will require careful collaboration across a wide range of disciplines, from liquidity provision and data dissemination to risk management and investor protection. As one participant put it, the goal is to evolve deliberately, not disruptively, ensuring that innovation strengthens rather than fragments the market.

Tokenization: The Next Frontier

Finally, a tokenization-focused panel highlighted how digital securities and blockchain-based settlement could redefine financial markets. Participants from Robinhood, OTC Markets Group, Securitize, and zerohash discussed models for native token issuance, permissioned ledgers and stablecoin-based payment rails – all aimed at reducing friction and unlocking liquidity. As Atkins observed earlier in the program, tokenization is not a distant concept, but a near-term evolution that can make markets faster, safer and more transparent.

The speakers agreed that tokenization's success will hinge on regulatory frameworks that allow for innovation while maintaining investor protections. Key discussion topics included the importance of sandbox environments to test new approaches and the need to harmonize with traditional securities laws to avoid fragmentation between tokenized and conventional markets.

Looking Ahead

If Redefining the Market was the theme of the conference, future-proofing was its throughline. Across keynotes and panels, participants stressed the importance of modernization grounded in principle – advancing technology, improving access and ensuring that the rules governing U.S. markets can stand the test of time.

As the industry continues to evolve, STA's 92nd Annual Market Structure Conference reaffirmed the importance of fostering dialogue among regulators, practitioners and innovators to help define what comes next.