

ENGAGING ENGINEERS IN PUBLIC POLICY

By Donald Wallace

IN THE FEW WEEKS since I started as executive director of the Ontario Centre for Engineering and Public Policy, I have been extremely heartened by the widespread support for the centre's establishment.



Wherever I've gone in the province, engineers and non-engineers alike have told me that greater involvement of the engineering profession in public policy discussions is long overdue.

A panoply of engineering-related issues have major public policy impacts; product safety, water, infrastructure, transportation, energy and environmental sustainability are but a few examples. Engineers and applied scientists are increasingly called upon to act as

key advisors to policy-makers in both the public and private sectors. Major changes in each of these areas are forcing leaders in government and industry to adapt old rules to a new environment.

The stakes are high: wise leadership could result in dramatic improvements in almost every area of life, but poor choices could threaten not only innovation and wealth but also privacy, safety and trust in government. Perhaps more than any other profession, engineering impacts the health and vitality of Ontario. Increasingly, technological complexity, greater environmental regulation and the drive towards greater transparency in planning processes are but three factors that act to enhance the public responsibility of engineers.

In a recent speech, Ontario Minister of Research and Innovation John Wilkinson identified three priorities for Ontario's innovation agenda:

1. conquering disease through the life sciences;
2. advancing/expanding the digital universe; and

3. sustaining humanity through bio-based, environmental and alternative energy technologies.

None of these priorities can be achieved without the participation and ingenuity of Ontario's professional engineers.

At the same time, engineers too often have only indirect connections to, or a haphazard engagement in, the development of public policy. Many times, their views are not sought by opinion makers and government officials, even when their expertise should be tapped. While many of us could come up with reasons for the relative absence of engineers from public discussions, the potential negative consequences for the design of sound public policy are considerable.

To this end, the centre has established a draft mission statement that includes the following goals:

- to enhance the engagement of the engineering profession in the development of public policy;
- to ensure that public policy development takes into account appropriate technical requirements for success;
- to develop innovative solutions to public policy problems based on technology; and
- to help engineering professionals translate complex technical issues into a publicly accessible discourse.

The establishment of the centre by PEO council in June represents a prescient and courageous response to this reality. Engineers have much to bring to a range of important public policy questions. The engineering profession can, and should, play a greater role in many policy areas. Stay tuned! Σ

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