



Building towards an engineering showplace

Although PEO is only weeks into its new headquarters building, the regulator has ambitious plans for the new engineering centre. It's expected the property will become a showplace, indicative of the profession's emergence as a recognized player in Ontario's growth, security and prosperity.

By Michael Mastromatteo



PEO's new headquarters building at 40 Sheppard Avenue West is a work in progress. The photos show progress in the extensive renovations to PEO's new home.

PEO's plans to renovate, occupy and give life to its new building have become as detailed as those that led to the purchase of the building in the first place.

It is taking no small measure of PEO staff and volunteer resources to ensure the move to the new engineering centre at 40 Sheppard Avenue West, across from PEO's rented home for the last 15 years, is done with efficiency, expediency and a certain élan.

PEO purchased the 22-year-old, 100,000-square-foot building in March 2009, following a member-approved licence fee increase. Key justifications for purchasing the new building were high rental costs and the lack of meeting and amenity space at the 25 Sheppard Avenue West building.

The purchase decision ended years of debate about ownership versus rental of office space. In the end, the long-term financial benefits of ownership, coupled with the building's potential to become an engineering showplace, helped turn the tide.

In a January 2008 essay for *Engineering Dimensions*, former PEO president Walter Bilanski, PhD, P.Eng., mused about the benefits of PEO owning its own building. "How do we see our profession and how do we want our profession to be seen?" Bilanski asked. "We need to value ourselves to be valued by others."

The need to show value suggests this is much more than an office relocation for PEO. Once the purchase arrangements were completed, PEO ramped up its plans to transform its new headquarters into something the entire engineering profession can be proud of. The regulator has engaged Sweeney, Sterling, Finlayson & Co Architects (&Co) to help with the transformation.

MOVING TASK FORCE

To further expedite the move, PEO also established a 40 Sheppard Task Force, which has arranged initial renovation and construction work, and engaged suppliers to submit bids for furniture and other supplies.

The task force, which includes President Catherine Karakatsanis, P.Eng., former councillor Nick Colucci, P.Eng., CEO/Registrar Kim Allen, P.Eng., and three of PEO's staff department heads, Frank Borsi, CA, Eric Brown, P.Eng., and Scott Clark, LLB, planned for the phased-in occupancy of the building throughout the fall.

The task force invited staff and volunteer input into the design and function of the new interior, and has kept all parties apprised of its progress through presentations and regular updates on PEO's intranet.

Initial work involved reconfiguring the original office space into an open work plan that takes advantage of natural light and optimizes working and meeting space.

Preliminary renovations to the building's interior were completed in October. In the meantime, PEO completed an initial floor plan showing where the various departments will be located in the new building. Eventually, the approximately 80 full-time staff will be congregated on one or two floors of the eight-storey building.

November 17 and 30, PEO staff and volunteers, including committee and chapter chairs and councillors, attended two "visioning" sessions to help get a feel for the interior design and provide their input. The sessions were organized by &Co as part of its service to PEO in the relocation. The architectural firm, which recently developed new sites for Microsoft (Canada), Loblaw Companies Limited and Royal Bank of Canada, will work closely with PEO as it develops its longer-range plans for the new building.

At the November 17 session, President Karakatsanis said the purchase of a new building is a good investment and an important milestone in the history of the regulator. "These visioning sessions prior to our occupying the property are just one aspect of the process to give shape to our new home," she said. "This is a key opportunity for us to align the building with PEO's vision."

The sessions included presentations by &Co architects on potential design and use scenarios for the 40 Sheppard building. Architects outlined recent changes in office design and usage, adding that energy costs, environmental impact and sustainability have become key factors in how office space is put to use.

The presenters also engaged PEO staff, volunteers and councillors in how PEO's vision of being a global leader in self-regulation might be incorporated in the look, design and longer-term use of the new building.

An important renovation prior to the staff move-in in December was to replace 1990s-style heat pumps and complete electrical upgrades. Given the increased use of computers and other equipment during the last 15 years, failure to upgrade in this area would have resulted in hot, stuffy workspaces. The task force decided to spend more than \$400,000 to address this issue.

Over time, PEO will undertake additional changes and renovations to fully identify the building as an engineering centre.

The structure has been home to the Intercon Security company since the late 1980s. It has also housed law and medical offices and commercial operations, most of which are expected to leave the building as their leases expire.

PEO will set up interim corporate signage near the main entrance of the new building, with a plan to affix larger, permanent signage at the top exterior, once the lease of the tenant holding the existing primary signage rights expires.

ADVANCE PREPARATIONS

With December's approach, employees were encouraged to make individual preparations for the move across the street. Much of this advance work was keenly felt by PEO's technical services team. The IT group's schedule called for it to begin disconnecting desktops at the old building starting December 17, with the main switchboard shut down the following day.

The official move-in date was set for December 21. The last day PEO had any rights to 25 Sheppard was December 31, 2009.

At the outset, PEO will occupy about a third of the total space available in the new building, by fitting into the vacated suites of former tenants. Eventually, PEO will occupy about half of the building through a series of "build outs" and office relocations to consolidate operations as additional space becomes vacant.

It's expected that, eventually, the PEO building will include a large auditorium to stage public presentations on engineering or regulatory issues. There has also been discussion of incorporating an engineering museum, library, archive and presentation centre into the new facility. In time, the auditorium space could be leased out on a for-profit basis.

Future plans call for the regulator to look for tenants, such as the Ontario Society of Professional Engineers, Consulting Engineers of Ontario and others to occupy some of the unused space in the building. Sharing space with engineering partner groups is seen as an important step in transforming the new building into an Ontario engineering centre.

Whatever the future holds, plans are for PEO's headquarters to become a high-profile landmark for the engineering profession, befitting its high status in Ontario. Task force members say the new home will reflect a sense of functionality, comfort, efficiency and prestige for staff, volunteers and visitors alike.

PEO council's November meeting opened with a report of the regulator's move-in and occupancy plans. The presentation by architect Mary Jane Finlayson of &Co included various scenarios for rooms, workspaces and amenity areas at 40 Sheppard.

Throughout the relocation, PEO's philosophy has been to be a responsible property owner, rather than "an occupier of space." Toward that end, PEO will undertake operational best practices for environmental sustainability that integrate with and support the design/built form. Future redesign decisions will be made in an inclusive manner with extensive stakeholder consultation.

Kim Allen has invited the consulting architects to discuss redesign or renovation elements that might apply to the new building in future issues of *Engineering Dimensions*. The articles will complement a new website being established by PEO and &Co that will provide instantaneous updates of the move-in, as well as opportunities for input from site visitors. The new building-related articles are tentatively slated to begin appearing in the March/April issue. Σ