

# Renewing our infrastructure

The challenge ahead



by Pat Quinn, P.Eng., President

**J**ust as nations, cities and communities must renew their infrastructures in order to evolve and grow, professions must reshape their infrastructures periodically to meet new challenges, and respond to the changing needs of members. PEO is no exception, and I believe we're well on our way toward restructuring our profession to meet the challenges and opportunities facing engineers in the new millennium (particularly the next decade).

I am encouraged by our progress, and believe my optimism is shared by most of my colleagues on Council, as well as a great many rank and file members. Further, I am pleased to tell you that at its meeting in June, Council approved in principle a draft plan for creation of a renewed, member-interest society (see p. 43 "Advocacy goal in sight: Council approves draft plan"). We are committed to seeing this process through, and invite you to lend your support to this important initiative.

## A voice for the profession

In recent years, many of us have come to recognize that we've fallen behind as a profession for lack of a strong public voice, and only limited input into public policy decisions. Unless we remedy this situation, our future as a profession will be hampered—at the very least we will continue to lose ground in comparison to other senior professions. To me this is self-evident, yet there are still those who argue that PEO can and should provide all programs and services for the profession. They maintain that separating the regulatory and nonregulatory (member-interest/advocacy) functions will weaken the profession. In response, I can only point to the success of other professions with their dual body infrastructures, and suggest that we have much to learn from their example.

Though regulatory bodies such as PEO may have carried out a variety of member-interest activities in the past (mainly member services), this is not possible in today's deregulated, privatized world. PEO is severely constrained, for instance, in taking advocacy positions on economic and turf issues, unless an iron-clad public interest argument can be made. Even the NDP government warned PEO against taking on an advocacy role. In her 1995 address to PEO Council, former Ontario Attorney General Marion Boyd said: "... from our perspective, there must be a distinct separation between the body that regulates the engineering profession and any organization that acts as an advocate for, or a leader of, the profession," reflecting a position upheld by every attorney general since the Professional Engineers Act was passed in 1984.

A member-interest professional society can be a strong and respected voice for the profession, speaking for members on economic and turf issues. Further, it can be much more proactive and outspoken than a regulatory body can be, focusing all of its energies and resources on promoting members' interests, while at the same time upholding our first duty to protect the public interest. I do not see these roles as contradictory; strong advocacy can and must reinforce our public responsibility. The difference lies in the way a member-interest body carries out its mandate, and the manner in which it makes its voice heard.

The experience of other self-regulating professions, such as law and medicine, shows that regulatory bodies and their sister advocacy associations can have a positive and symbiotic relationship, when the advocacy objectives of building a stronger profession are clearly in the best interests of the public and society as a whole.

I believe we can best serve our profession and society by speaking out with a

strong voice, and helping to shape public policy in matters involving applied science and technology, and related economic issues. If we accept that PEO sometimes finds itself in a potential conflict of interest in dealing with such questions, the path ahead is clear.

## We need your support

In the 1998 membership referendum on advocacy, 72 per cent of voting members (10,394) said they would support the creation of an independent advocacy body.

Members who believe they don't need an organization to advocate on their behalf are missing something very important. Advocacy is not for individuals, although as individuals we will certainly benefit. It is for our profession. But widespread participation will be needed. Think of democratic systems: they function most effectively when the majority of citizens exercise their right (and some would argue their obligation) to vote. I believe every member of our profession has a stake in, and an obligation to support, a strong voice that can speak for our profession and participate in public policy debates without clouding regulatory issues.

It's now time to move forward to put in place the renewed infrastructure we will need in the new century. We must have the courage, foresight and wisdom to build strong regulatory and advocacy bodies that will grow and contribute to our profession and society for many years to come.

Engineering was one of the great but underappreciated professions of this century. It can be as great or greater in the future if we grant ourselves the means to realize the limitless opportunities on our horizon. We deserve to be better recognized and appreciated. And we will be, if we do what needs doing, with faith in ourselves, and the courage to contribute to society and our profession through a strong organized voice. ♦