

# Great *Expectations*

*New president hopes success in private practice, based on collaboration and teamwork, will translate into corporate achievement at PEO.*

**BY MICHAEL MASTROMATTEO**

**T**here was an unmistakable show of support and enthusiasm from delegates attending PEO's May 9 annual general meeting as Catherine Karakatsanis, P.Eng., received the president's gavel from Past President Dave Adams, P.Eng.

The sustained standing ovation she received is indicative of the profession's high hopes for the first female president in 12 years, and the fourth in PEO history (90th president overall).

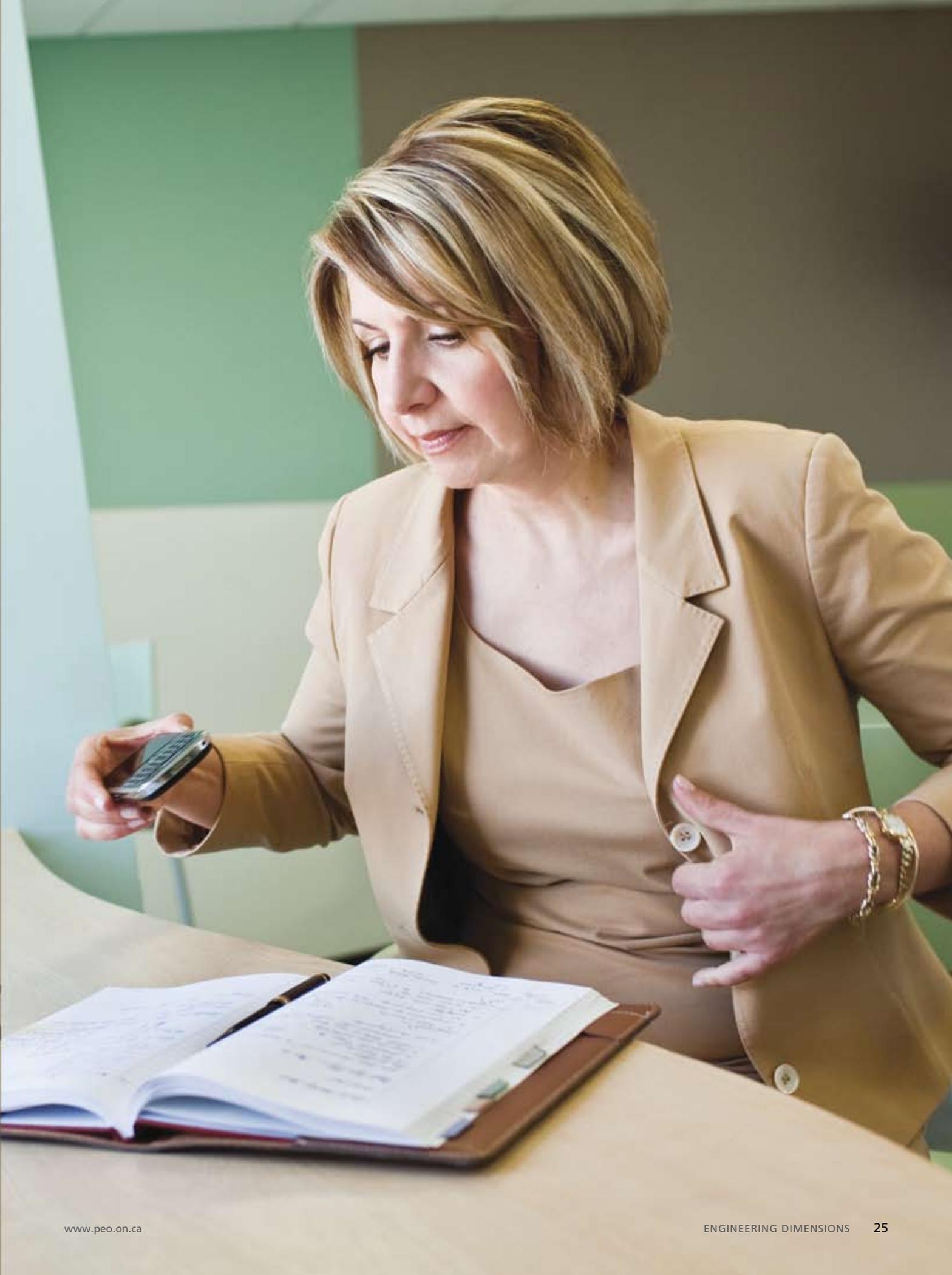
But with high hopes come high expectations, and Karakatsanis was quick to point out she is but one of 29 making decisions for PEO's future.

"It has been said that one person can be a crucial ingredient on a team, and that's true. But

one person cannot make a team," Karakatsanis said. "It's my belief that the president should not alone determine the direction of PEO, or be its only public face. He or she must lead council and together, as a team, determine the direction of PEO."

In her 20th year with consulting engineering firm Morrison Hershfield's Toronto office, Karakatsanis is familiar with the importance of teamwork in accomplishing often complex objectives. It's a skill set she hopes will leave her well positioned to bring out the best in PEO council's deliberations.

"During my term I will rely heavily on the very strong group dynamic that comprises PEO





council,” she said at the annual meeting. “We have a very talented, intelligent, capable mix of professionals on council, and the positive results we will achieve with our work this year will stem from a collaborative effort.”

The new president also spoke of teamwork and consensus building as a cornerstone for any organization looking for transparency and accountability in its actions.

### CLOSING IN ON A BIG GOAL

This nuanced appreciation of leadership to meet corporate objectives was much in evidence during council’s annual workshop, held this year in Niagara-on-the-Lake from June 18 to 20.

“It’s always been a concern of mine that the one-year term as president can make it difficult for continuity,” Karakatsanis said during a June 22 interview. “That’s why the workshop at the council event was dedicated to finding a consensus for PEO’s strategic intents and creating a process so that intents and priorities remain on track.”

Working with council and senior staff, Karakatsanis hopes to define “an ideal state” for PEO—some 25 to 35 years into the future—a big audacious goal that may not even be fully achievable. Next, she says, council will determine the several strategic principles (or intents) that PEO must make progress on to move towards its ideal state. Operational plans generated as part of the organization’s annual business planning and budgeting process will then be aligned with achieving the intents, and any proposed new initiatives will be tested for whether they will move PEO closer to or farther from them.

“The resulting work plan will direct council from year to year, day to day, and ultimately provide the operational initiative for PEO departments and staff,” she says. “Council will set policy direction and monitor its progress, and staff will facilitate the policy through its implementation.”

It’s envisioned that any proposals that don’t readily align with the defined strategic intents would be sent back to PEO’s Executive Committee for further review and investigation.

### BALANCING PEO AND CAREER

Despite a long record of service to the engineering profession, primarily through the Ontario Society of Professional Engineers (OSPE), where she was president in 2002-2003, but also as a PEO committee member and as a member of the boards of the Ontario Professional Engineers Foundation for Education and the University of Western Ontario’s faculty of engineering advisory committee, Karakatsanis says she needed to be convinced to stand for election as PEO president-elect. And it was former presidents Peter DeVita, P.Eng., George Comrie, P.Eng., and Robert Goodings, P.Eng., who persuaded her that PEO would benefit from a leader with her background, temperament and commitment to the profession.

A Toronto resident, Karakatsanis obtained her engineering undergraduate and master’s degrees at the University of Western Ontario, staying on as a research assistant after graduation.

She joined Morrison Hershfield in 1989 and has had a diversified career with extensive engineering and management experience. She has been a structural engineer, project manager and construction manager; conducted specialized engineering research for litigation; and held several management positions. Her current role is senior vice president (buildings and facilities).

In fact, Karakatsanis is the first PEO president in several years to combine the presidency with a full-time career—a balancing act she’s already found is going to present an ongoing challenge. But it’s a challenge she says she’s willing to undertake—even if it’s only to help PEO move incrementally toward its goals.

“I don’t feel any special pressure from council or staff to make groundbreaking achievements,” she says. “However, I think it has been helpful that in my private practice, I’ve learned how to avoid some of the pitfalls that can derail very worthwhile initiatives.”

Away from engineering, Karakatsanis has an array of interests and pastimes. She’s an accomplished musician on both the viola and piano—admittedly with less time these days for concerts—and she enjoys occasional skiing vacations in British Columbia. When time permits, she can be found at the family cottage in the Penetanguishene area of Georgian Bay.

She also has one son, Alexander, who is studying arts and science at York University.

### MAKING P.ENG. MORE MEANINGFUL

In her 2008 election campaign, Karakatsanis offered a compact list of priorities for 2009. These include ongoing defence of engineering self-regulation, stepped-up enforcement of the *Professional Engineers Act*, a possible review of the industrial exception clause in the act, addressing the perennial concern about the low rate of engineering graduates pursuing licensing, and, in keeping with her interest in consensus building,

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fostering improved relations among PEO, Engineers Canada, OSPE and other stakeholders in the wider profession.

She's also concerned with efforts to make the P.Eng. designation more meaningful to the general public.

"One significant issue in particular that will be addressed this year is the creation of a professional development system for licence holders," she said prior to last spring's election. "As part of our mandate, PEO has a responsibility to establish, maintain and develop standards of qualification, knowledge, skill, practice and ethics for the practice of professional engineering, and to ensure that licence holders have met and continue to meet those standards. Similarly, all practitioners have the responsibility for the maintenance of their knowledge, and PEO holds them potentially accountable for this."

The new president believes that a professional development system, in which all licence holders participate, is necessary to ensure transparency for all PEO stakeholders, including the public.

As someone who is quick to emphasize the positive, Karakatsanis believes PEO is a leader among Canadian regulators of professions. She acknowledges efforts by her predecessors to make the organization more transparent to membership and more relevant to policy-makers, citing the establishment of the Ontario Centre for Engineering and Public Policy in 2008 as a key step in forging the engineering-public policy link.

The new president looks to PEO's volunteer network as the foundation for its ongoing administrative and corporate success. She believes the organization is blessed with a strong cadre of volunteers who lessen the load of staff and council. She summed up these feelings prior to chairing her first council meeting on May 9.

"We are fortunate to have so many individuals with a strong desire to improve our profession," Karakatsanis said, "from the more than 800 volunteers who serve on task forces and committees, chapters and Government Liaison Program, to the wonderful staff at PEO who work diligently to help council make informed decisions, to my colleagues at the decision-making table, who sacrifice much to advance our profession. With your support, co-operative relations with our engineering partners, including OSPE, Consulting Engineers of Ontario, Engineers Canada, the Ontario Association of Certified Engineering Technicians and Technologists, and my counterparts across the country, and with my commitment to work on your behalf, we can continue to strengthen the value and relevance of the profession and the P.Eng. licence." Σ

