

A look at the year ahead



by Pat Quinn, P.Eng., President

As I write this column, I have been your new President for just five days, and have already attended PEO's AGM and several committee meetings, and dealt with association business—both urgent and routine. This weekend, I am booked to represent PEO at the Association of Professional Engineers and Geoscientists of Saskatchewan's AGM. When I return, there will be a hectic schedule of other meetings and duties for PEO.

Yes, I volunteered. Yes, I did so willingly. But I worry about limiting our Presidents to either being figure heads or those rich enough or old enough to make such a time commitment. I don't think we need to worry about members taking on the presidency for the money, if, in some way, we were to subsidize those willing to lead and serve us. At the April AGM, a members' resolution was put forward to reimburse for lost income members who volunteer their time during working hours to serve PEO. Although the resolution was defeated, I believe that this issue should be considered more thoroughly and debated.

Over the past 12 months, the association has seen a difficult period of transition. On your behalf, I have thanked Past President Dr. Walter Bilanski, P.Eng., his Council and our staff for their outstanding efforts in overcoming the difficulties and meeting the challenges.

We have made changes, organized committees, and studied issues to establish processes that will better satisfy the profession's future needs. At chapter and Council meetings, Regional Congresses, conferences and our annual meeting, we joined in debate about all our issues. Our goal was to give all members who take an interest in association affairs the opportunity to contribute to the debate—and I am pleased to note that many of you have.

Crunch time has arrived—the time to make decisions and move forward.

Facing the future

In making decisions, your 1999-2000 Council has to recognize the different future the profession is facing. Civil engineering is no longer the primary discipline. Concrete and steel may have built the cities and infrastructure of our 20th century world, but they will not be predominant in the new century. It is generally accepted that technology, information and structural changes in society will be the challenges we'll face in the next century, and engineers will be crucial to meeting them. Council must have these considerations in mind when setting policy for PEO.

Key issues for 1999-2000

Members have told us that we need an independent voice to speak for engineers, without creating a conflict of interest with the profession's regulatory functions. Questions have to be answered and decisions made on an advocacy/member-services body's viability, start-up projects, long-term objectives and ongoing operation, before we commit resources to this new organization.

We have recognized the need to revamp our admissions, complaints, discipline and enforcement processes. Fundamental philosophical questions must be answered about our provisions for licensure, alternative dispute mechanisms, legal education of discipline panels and proactive enforcement to protect public safety. (The fatalities in the recent train derailment in Thamesville, Ontario, raise questions about the use of technology to ensure safety or the lack thereof, and the role of professional engineers in the federal railway jurisdiction.)

The use of the word engineer in misleading titles, such as "systems engineer" or "network engineer," has to be stopped.

Otherwise, the proliferation of unlicensed information technology professionals using engineering titles will confuse the public, since it won't be clear that these individuals aren't qualified or entitled to practise professional engineering. The level of public concern about the reliability of computers on January 1 of next year underlines their potential for affecting public safety—and the need to ensure that "software engineering" is done by professional engineers.

Practitioners dealing with emerging technologies and working in nontraditional engineering disciplines need to be recognized when they enter the realm of engineering practice, and they need to be properly accommodated in order to become part of the profession. Their qualifications can't be judged against a civil engineering background.

The last issue I'd like to mention is the continuing competence question. We need to determine what problem is being resolved and for whom. Experiences across the country seem to confirm many of Council's concerns about mandatory programs that involve a lot of paper work, and have such a low bar that everybody can readily jump over it. When held up to scrutiny against engineering failures, these programs may be exposed as "much ado about nothing." Continuing competence is not professional development or continuing education. We need to define these terms, decide what we should and can mandate, and then develop methods that are defensible safeguards for the public.

Keeping the debate going

Our recent AGM and other association meetings indicate a vibrant, vital level of discussion and commitment to moving forward on all these issues. During the coming year, your input and contributions will continue to be valued and gratefully received. ◆