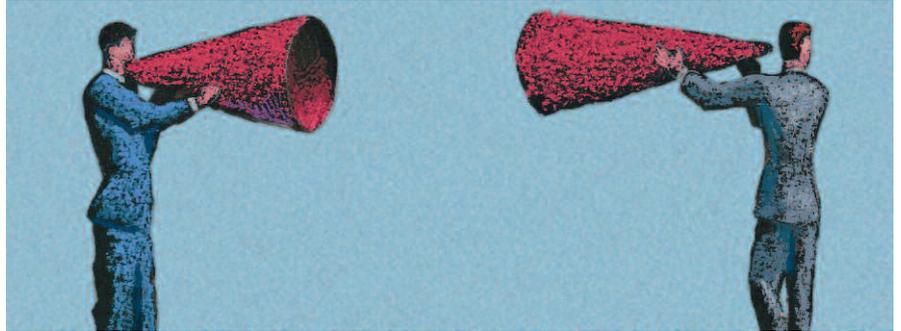


## What it's like to run for public office



Diane Freeman—P.Eng., PEO Vice President, Waterloo city councillor, consulting engineer, and very busy person—recently sat down with Jennifer Coombes to discuss what it's really like to run for public office.

**Jennifer Coombes:** Diane, you were involved with PEO early on in your career, starting even as an EIT. What drew you to PEO, and how did you serve in the beginning?

**Diane Freeman:** The education outreach program originally drew me. I felt it was really important that students realize they maintain their options for careers if they maintain their mathematics and sciences. When I chose engineering as a career, I didn't have a clear understanding of all the areas in which engineering touches our lives, not because the information wasn't out there, but because it wasn't really delivered at that high school level. I felt as though I didn't have a clear understanding of the career path. I had a personal goal to try to change that for some people.

I felt, and still feel, that the Education Committee at PEO does a tremendous amount of work to message

engineering to the greater population and achieve the goal in the Act related to increasing the knowledge of the profession. To me that gets back to the relevance of the P.Eng. licence.

So, initially, I was involved in delivering education outreach programs at a chapter level and then eventually I started working with the Education Committee and that got me interested in working at a higher level in terms of policy decisions.

**JC:** Over the last 15 years, you've steadily increased your involvement with PEO. What has motivated you to take on more and more, including running for PEO Council?

**DF:** I graduated from engineering in 1992 and started on the chapter then. EITs weren't recognized at that time, so my involvement wasn't formally recognized until I received my licence in 1994.

I think one of the things that motivated me at first, still remains: the relevance of the P.Eng. and messaging the importance of licensure to the public.

I'm not good at criticizing other people, being someone on the outside who says, "Well, why didn't they think of this?" I believe if you want to be part of policy decision making, you should put your name out and let people decide whether they think your ideas are going to bring value to the decision-making table. That's why I chose to run; it's why I want to stay on the executive; it's why I strive to always come prepared to PEO Council; and it's why I encourage people in the chapter system to get more involved. Bellyaching isn't going to change things, but active participation and motivation for change will.

**JC:** Recently you won a seat on Waterloo City Council. What's it like to run for public office?

**DF:** Running for office is truly one of the hardest things I've ever done. When anyone chooses to put their name on the ballot, it puts you out there. And it's really hard, some of the things people choose to say to you. Certainly I had people say to me, "I will never vote for a woman," and then slam the door in my face. Or, "Don't you see the sign on my lawn for your opposition? Are you really that blonde?" It's tough because you wear that very personally.

But there are these incredible highs, too. You'll be at a debate or something and people will come up and say, "I didn't know anything about you and I really appreciate what you had to say tonight." So, you have these really big highs but, because of human nature, you allow the negative to get in.

**JC:** So, how did you cope in the end?

**DF:** There was a citizens group that sent out the results of its polls to candidates the day of the election, which showed I was going to lose by 40 per cent. I'm so glad I couldn't figure out how to open the attachment, because I didn't see the bad news until after I found out I'd won.

It's day to day and one of the ways you survive is because of the people who care about you. You need a thick skin.

**JC:** How did running for Waterloo City Council differ from running for PEO Council?

**DF:** There were two reasons why I chose to run for city council and they're the same reasons I ran for PEO Council. I've listened to people who think engineers would be good decision makers, and yet, as engineers, we don't necessarily step up. Also, I feel that women believe other women bring value to the decision-making table. So, I thought, if diversity at the decision-making table brings value, and engineering brings value, I'm going to put both things on the ballot and see whether the general public feels that way, too.

What's different about PEO Council and city council is that at a city position you're not just asking your peers to have faith in your decisions, you're also asking the public: "Do you believe the engineering degree brings value to a municipal decision-making table?"

I waited to run for [PEO] Council until I had demonstrated my skills at the chapter and regional congress levels and I had built friendships. In city council, you become involved in volunteerism within your community, but you're not as out there. I had next to no name recognition when I started running. So that was a really big difference between the two.

**JC:** If you had little name recognition, why do you think you won your seat?

**DF:** I know that my engineering degree meant a lot to people. When I knocked on doors, if I had two seconds with someone, the three things I told them were that I work full-time as an engineer in the ward, I volunteer in the ward, and I think that I can bring a fresh viewpoint to [city] council. It has continued to be a big asset, because I know that people ask me technical questions because they think that I can get the answer for them. I bring the skills with me that I campaigned on, and I strive to ask the questions that my constituents can't.

**JC:** Members of PEO have a great opportunity to get involved in politics. Why should PEngs take part? And what are some of the ways they can lend their expertise?

**DF:** I think PEO members have so much to offer to policy planning. And I truly believe that a lot of the policies that we manage—environmentally, in particular—in the province can be a real challenge. If engineers were part of the decision making at the very early stages, I think that would really improve the ability to implement public policy.

One of the ways I think engineers can get more involved is in their riding

associations. Riding associations often have a hard time identifying good candidates to run. Engineers can really get involved in that. They're out there, they know who the good business people are, they know who are good decision makers and, within those ranks, they should be able to identify some candidates to run.

The ethical side of engineering, I think, is tremendous, too, because a lot of politicians aren't members of a profession, and they aren't bound by the same code of ethics. I'm very cognizant that, for example, I can't say something as a city councillor that breaks the [engineering] Code of Ethics. And I think that's of tremendous value in politics.

I think engineers are also very good decision makers. It's our forte. And politics comes down to building policy decisions. So, engineers at a decision-making table can technically analyze the problem, offer solutions, and develop policy that can be implemented.

Also, the public counts on engineers to ask questions. I get told that all the time from people who say, "Don't stop asking the questions. They're excellent. They're unlike any questions that we've heard asked before." I think that's interesting.

**JC:** Are there any particular qualities that are needed for people wanting to get into politics?

**DF:** You know, there is one singular quality that any person needs to get into politics and that's a desire to serve. The moment you lose sight of that desire to serve, you become self serving. It's a slippery slope when that happens and people see right through it.

But that singular quality is also really hard, because if you're truly serving, you're out there. There are days when it would be a lot easier to make a decision and not care. When you care, the decisions don't come as quick. The questions are more full and you have to really consider all angles. Finding the fulcrum of balance is really hard.

**JC:** Do you have any words of encouragement or advice for those planning to run for public office?

**DF:** I've always told anyone who's asked me this question that the singular most important thing to do if you're planning to run for office is to make sure that the people who you love will support you in that choice. Because whether you win or lose, those are the people who need to stay around you. If you're surrounding yourself with people who are only in it for you to win, you're going to really be disappointed.

And only take advice from people who tell you they love you, because others may be self serving. It's hard though. Advice comes from all corners.

And the other thing is, if you have a heart of service and you have a willingness, go for it. Seriously, go for it, and be prepared to win.

**JC:** You're seen as somewhat of a Wonder Woman. You have family commitments to your two small boys, dogs and husband (not necessarily in that order), plus your position with Conestoga-Rovers and Associates and your PEO, Waterloo City Councillor, and many other volunteer commitments. How do you hold it together?

**DF:** I certainly have someone who cleans the house. And my husband and I share the responsibilities at home very evenly. But there's really only one way that I do it, and that's with a very tight schedule.

I have four parts in the day that I can schedule in: a breakfast meeting, a lunch meeting, and then I have my morning and afternoon, and I can schedule an evening meeting.

I have two BlackBerries: one for work, and one for the city. I basically invite myself to meetings between the two.

There are very specific things I did with regards to city council. I have city council meetings Monday night and am often in in-camera meetings with the city Monday afternoons. So I said [to the city], if constituents want to meet with me I'm pleased to, but I want to meet with them on Monday mornings. So,

then I can tell my employer, you won't see me on Mondays. That's worked out really well. I typically get to city hall at 9:00 and I'll back-to-back my meetings throughout the day until we start in camera. I'll get home at 11:00 or 12:00 at night on a Monday, so it's a long day, but I've just completed so much and that frees up my Tuesday to Friday to work for my company.

Conestoga-Rovers is very forward thinking as an employer from the perspective of the importance of engineers serving. And when we talk about how PEO members can get involved in politics, that's a tremendous example. You can support people who work for you.

**JC:** What do you personally get out of all your volunteer work?

**DF:** The reason I do the things I do is because I want to provide service to the community or PEO members or children. That's a goal that's achieved every day you do it, so there's a tremendous amount of personal satisfaction. It's important to me to demonstrate to my children the value of service. If I don't mentor that to them, they'll never learn.

Just the other week my 12-year-old wanted to join me for a [city] council meeting. When we were driving to the meeting I said to him, "You know, some people think that with all the things that I make time to do, I choose to do those at the expense of you, that I always choose my family last." He turned to me and, very indignantly, said to me, "Mom, that's not true." I said, "I know that and you know that, so that's all that really matters."

I also get a tremendous amount of professional development through volunteering. You're often asked to chair committees or a task force, or get a project done, and it's tremendous project management experience and you're not paying for a course.

The other aspect is professional networking. My volunteering is kind of vast from a political side to a professional side with PEO, to a very social services side with the daycare that I'm

the president of (Butterfly Learning Centre). Because you're touching on some very different aspects of community, there's just a tremendous number of individuals who you become acquainted with, some of whom become very close friends. That's a wonderful outcome.

**JC:** What's next for you?

**DF:** When we initially discussed doing this interview, I was planning to run to become a member of the Large Urban Caucus with the Association of Municipalities of Ontario (AMO). I was successful in securing that board seat. I wanted to do that because I see the importance of governance through PEO, and I see AMO as a governance structure for all the municipalities in the sense that there's this melting pot of community members and involvement. I've never been on this really strong advocacy side and AMO works very strong in that perspective. I just felt that I had a tremendous opportunity to learn there. And so I'm thrilled to be on that board.

I certainly hope that I meet with the expectations of my constituents such that I might be able to secure another term as city councillor, because I really enjoy the job. From there, I don't know. I don't really have a crystal ball that looks that far down the road. I really love what I do for Conestoga-Rovers. The air dispersion modeling is really exciting. It's so dynamic because it changes with every industry that I work with. I feel this company just makes such a huge commitment to their employees and to the community and they've very willingly supported me. I really value that. ❖

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