

A VIEWPOINT ON GOVERNANCE

A PEO councillor-at-large, vice president and former regional councillor explains council's role under the act and regulations, and offers a perspective on the need for council to have a long-term strategy for governing the profession and protecting Ontario's citizens.



By John Vieth, P.Eng.

PROFESSIONAL Engineers Ontario is the association of all licensed professional engineers in Ontario. Twenty-nine volunteers serve on its governing council, and it is difficult to imagine why any of us would make this commitment other than our strong belief in serving the profession.

The context of this service is established in the *Professional Engineers Act*. Article 2.(3) defines the role of our association clearly. Our association is to govern the practice of professional engineering in the interest of all of the citizens of Ontario. This presents a challenging obligation for councillors. First and foremost, our actions and decisions must be in the context of the act and regulations. For every decision, we must be satisfied that the outcome will improve or at least maintain the quality and service of professional engineering for the citizens of Ontario. Our association does not have a mandate to improve the lot for our practitioners at the expense of, or without benefit to, the public. Maybe this is the reason for having 29 voices—a portion of whom are appointed from outside the profession.

PEO governs our profession by issuing licences to those qualified to practise professional engineering, establishing regulations and stan-

dards of practice and ethics, and disciplining licensed practitioners who break those rules. PEO also brings legal action against those who practise, or offer to practise, professional engineering without a licence.

I think PEO serves the citizens of Ontario well. There is no shortage of qualified professional engineers practising in our province. Some would argue there are too many, but this is not the concern of a regulator. And considering the low number of incidents attributed to improper practice by licensed professional engineers, and the relatively small number of licence holders who are called before a discipline panel, the citizens of Ontario appear to be receiving good engineering service.

Nevertheless, our association should continue to strive for improvement, which requires change and change requires leadership. It is the governing council of PEO that ultimately must provide the leadership for change to improve professional engineering service for all of the citizens of Ontario.

Leadership is not easy, particularly for an organization like PEO. There are 29 people around the council table, as set out in the act and regulations, and each person at the table has a voice. Some have expressed frustration that council moves too slowly to change and therefore has not

delivered improvements at the expected rate. There have been proposals to reduce the number of councillors and redefine how they are elected or appointed so that change can be more rapid and perhaps more radical. Others have the view that not all voices at the council table are equal and have tried to push through an agenda without wanting to allow due debate and consideration.

However, according to the act and regulations and PEO policy, council is obligated to consider how proposed initiatives serve the interests of the citizens of Ontario first and practitioners second. Shouldn't there be time for due process so that council can make well-informed decisions? Is it possible that initiatives have been rejected by council because, as presented, they did not support the interests of the citizens of Ontario and the members of the association? I find it disconcerting to have to vote against a good idea because a hastily developed implementation proposal doesn't pass the "gut" test.

In my own experience, frustration comes from the change in priorities that has often occurred with each newly elected council. A new president is elected annually and as many as one-third of council members might also be new. So much good will and effort by staff and volunteers has been lost through the ensuing change in focus and priorities. Can a volunteer-driven organization complete proper policy development from idea to implementation in 12 months? Lengthening the term of office might help, but is it reasonable to expect such an extended commitment of PEO's volunteer leadership in such demanding roles, especially when balancing a career and personal life?

Perhaps a more productive way would be to set a strategic plan for the association independently of the quasi-political council elections. With such a philosophy, it might be possible for a succession of new councils to carry forward on a contiguous five-year strategy. In my opinion, adopting this new philosophy for participation on PEO council would be much more effective in improving professional engineering practice for Ontarians than tinkering with the size of the council and how it is elected.

I ask you to judge the performance of PEO as the regulator of professional engineering from the perspective of the citizens of Ontario first and practitioners second. Elect leaders to PEO council who are prepared to adopt a long-term strategic agenda as their own, evolving it forward in a con-

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tiguous process, and who are willing to work co-operatively within the policies of the association. Σ

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