

Being a self-governing profession

In the ongoing discussion of the respective roles and mandates of Professional Engineers Ontario and the Ontario Society of Professional Engineers in repre-

senting Ontario's engineering profession, I am disturbed when I hear remarks that reveal a lack of understanding and appreciation of the fundamental principles underlying Canada's self-governing professions. By way of example, some have suggested that PEO is simply "an arm of the [Ontario] government" and that it is "owned and paid for by the government."

The logical conclusion of such thinking is that PEO, and its members and chapters, are precluded from speaking out on matters of public policy involving technology and from promoting the role of the engineering profession in serving the public. Nothing could be further from the truth!

The reality is this: The people of Ontario through legislation have entrusted to us professional engineers the responsibility of regulating the practice of engineering in the province in the public interest, and have delegated to us the authority to do so. Yes, it is true that our status as a self-governing profession could be revoked if we do not discharge our responsibilities properly. Presumably we would then be in the position of our colleagues south of the border who obtain their licences to practise from state licensing boards, which truly are arms of government.

I would point out that it is precisely this (being part of a self-governing profession, (that ties us all together, with our widely diverse backgrounds, areas of specialization, and types of practice. Our U.S. counterparts, who do not have the common bond of being part of a self-governing profession, organize themselves instead around their technical specialties, represented by learned societies and industry/trade groups such as AIIE, ASHRAE, ASM, IEEE and SAE, to name just a few.

What does it mean (as the *Professional Engineers Act* puts it) to: "regulate the practice of professional engineering... in order that the public interest may be served and protected?" Surely it means that the public is entitled to expect us to advise them, both directly and through the government, of issues related to the application of science and technology in our society, and on how best to use our collective expertise in managing technology. Surely it means that we have a responsibility to be proactive in establishing the mechanisms to regulate practice effectively in emerging disciplines and areas of specialization, including areas that may overlap those of other professional and technical groups in the applied science arena.

We also have responsibility (set out specifically in our Act as "to promote public awareness of the role of the Association") to educate the public about the role of the self-regulating profession in society—(a responsibility we share with the Society. I have no qualms about doing this boldly because I am convinced that the public is best served by a strong, cohesive, self-governing engineering profession that is well understood and valued by society.

I am also fully convinced that the government and the public are getting "one hell of a deal" by delegating these responsibilities to us professionals. Just consider the number of PEO members who volunteer their time and talents to serve the public interest at no cost to the public. What would it cost the public purse to perform these necessary functions directly through government agencies, and just how well would the job be done?

The bottom line is this: If we don't believe that our current model of a self-governing profession is advantageous to both the public and the profession, we should abandon it in favour of the U.S. model. I have no interest whatever in serving as an unpaid agent of the Ontario government, regardless of who may be in power. If all we're doing here is the government's dirty work for no reward and no thanks, count me out!

As the Society's recent research on public opinion has confirmed, the engineering profession has earned the trust and respect of the people of Ontario, howev-

er unsophisticated their understanding of our contribution may be, and I believe we continue to merit that confidence. I see no evidence that we are perceived to be either self-serving or in dereliction of our responsibilities to the public.

I am proud to belong to a self-governing profession that delivers value to the public and to its members. Together, PEO and the Society have an unparalleled opportunity to finally put engineering in Ontario "on the map." Let's get on with it!

*George R. Comrie, P.Eng.
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Problems with limited licensing of C.E.T.s

Following an article in the May/June issue, (pp. 20-21), I strongly disagree with proposals for limited licensing of C.E.T.s for the following reasons:

1. It may create further public confusion concerning the practice of engineering;
2. It may denigrate efforts at establishing public recognition of the value of the engineering profession (licensing of C.E.T.s would appear to conflict with some aspects of the present mandate of OSPE).
3. It may create a great deal of enforcement activity at PEO. While most C.E.T.s would likely fully understand the limitations of the engineering work allowed to be performed under a limited licensing scenario, I do not believe this would be the case for all C.E.T.s. I also believe the conflicts that could develop would be detrimental to the profession. Many other professions have resisted this type of limited licensing, i.e. physicians, nurses, solicitors, paralegals, in an effort to maintain the integrity of the profession and secure public trust. I believe that PEO should not consider limited licensing and should support efforts such as that by OSPE in promotion of the engineering profession.

*John Unsworth, P.Eng.
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PEO specialist program

The article "Demanding Qualifications and Competence" (pp 34-36, 43) in the



May/June issue asks this question related to engineering: "Does one size fits all adequately ensure public welfare in every area of practice or meet the public expectations?" The answer is clearly "No!" as far as fire safety engineering is concerned, and I suspect in a number of other speciality areas.

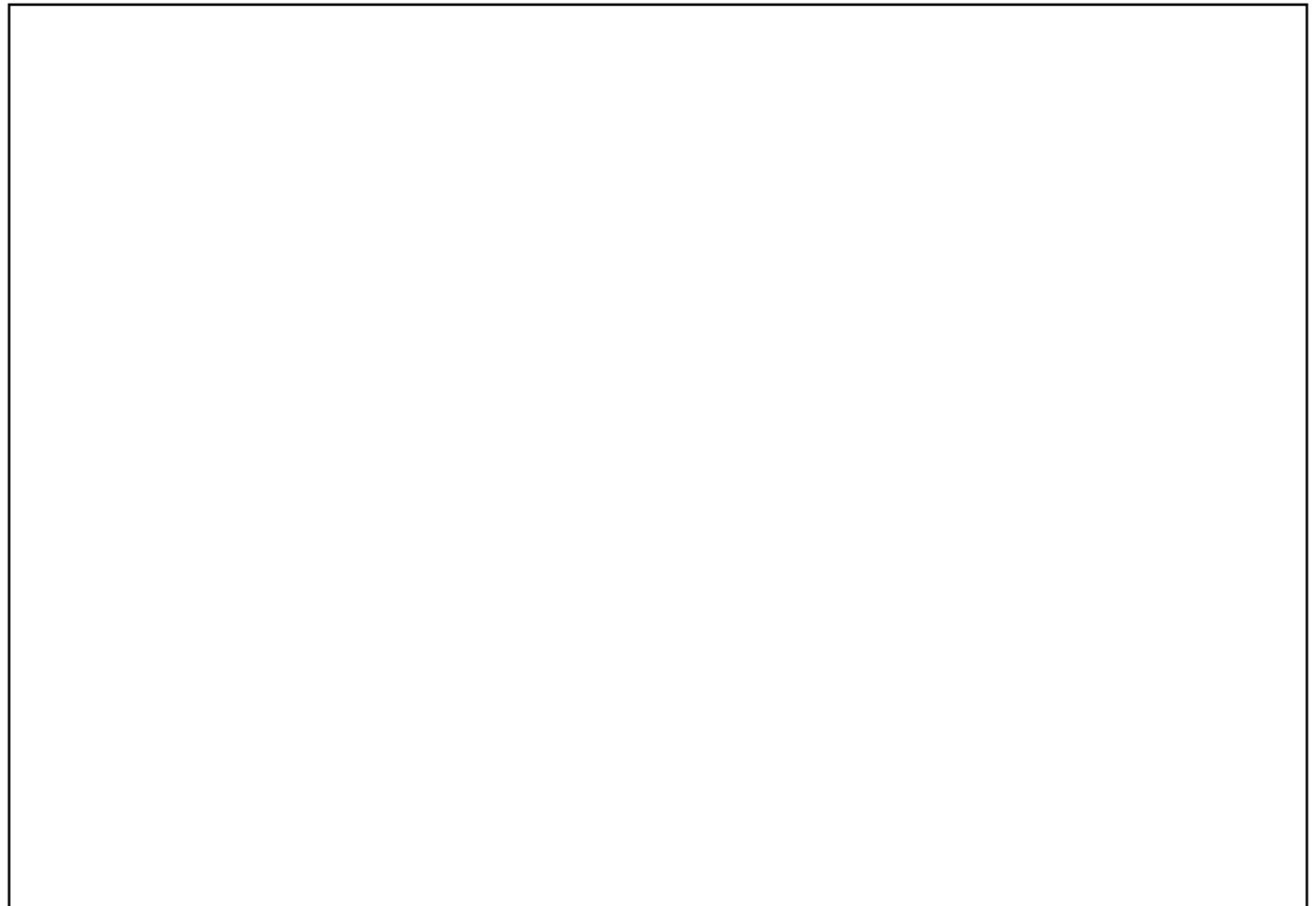
Currently, fire safety engineering is practised by many engineers with varying degrees of competence from novice to skilled practitioner. In many cases, fire safety engineering competence is considered to be a passing knowledge of the building code or of certified products. That is not sufficient and as the BRRAG has pointed out there are large numbers of errors in building permit applications.

Is this serious? Indeed it is! If one looks at the Ontario Building Code, it can quickly be seen that the majority of the Code relates to fire safety (and errors in fire safety are obviously being made). The government's response is Bill 124, which will, among other things, require individuals (not only engineers) to be tested on their knowledge of the Code (see this issue, p13). That is all well and good but it will not necessarily ensure that those who pass an exam will have a knowledge of fire safety engineering. Having PEO administer the exams to engineers and

provide a register only provides further credence to the fact that these engineers with Code knowledge can practise fire safety engineering. This is not enough; PEO must take action to meet the public and government's expectations of competence in fire safety engineering.

The solution is a specialist program, similar in principle to what the legal and medical professions have undertaken. The P.Eng. licence is the basic building block; the Specialist Designation would add value and provide a demonstration of expertise. Consulting Engineer designation does not do it. In addition to specialist engineering expertise, a Specialist Designation would also need to incorporate a knowledge of the relevant codes and standards for that specialist area. This specialist solution would then enable PEO to take the lead and at the same time to incorporate Bill 124 in a positive way for engineers.

For those who may have forgotten, PEO had a specialist program in the late



1970s and early 1980s. Perhaps it wasn't perfect, but it had a vision. The program was cancelled approximately 20 years ago because it wasn't cost effective, possibly due to pressure from the one-size-fits-all camp. Perhaps it is time for PEO leadership, rather than having engineers follow the pack. The time is right for a number of reasons:

- ◆ With Bill 124, there will be a number of engineers (and others) who will claim a knowledge (or expertise) in fire safety because they have passed the code exam. Fire safety engineering will be undertaken increasingly by people with code knowledge rather than fire safety engineering knowledge. This is applicable to other specialty disciplines as well;
- ◆ A new masters program in fire safety engineering at Carleton University provides a first academic foundation for fire safety engineering in Ontario. PEO can capitalize on the success of that program;
- ◆ The public and the government are demanding a means for engineers to demonstrate expertise to practise in speciality disciplines. PEO can provide the answer with a Specialist Program.
- ◆ With the advent of objective- (performance-) based codes, the need for fire safety engineers will grow. A knowledge of the codes or a general knowledge of fire safety will not be enough to undertake or review designs based on fire safety engineering principles.

I urge PEO to act quickly and regain the leadership position it held 20 years ago. This is not the time for hesitation if we want to avert potential disasters in the fire safety arena.

*J. Kenneth Richardson, P.Eng.
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Fees vs responsibility: equation doesn't add up

I assume from the views expressed in the President's Message in the last issue (p. 3), "Assuring technical responsibility" that he cannot possibly be a structural engineer or a geotechnical engineer, offering services to the general public.

He wrote about engineers operating outside their chosen area of expertise, and is concerned about the "erosion of the authority provided under the *Professional Engineers Act*." You don't suppose that this has anything to do with the fact that engineers are so poorly compensated for their work that they have no choice but to venture into other areas of engineering just to survive when times are lean in their chosen field?

In my opinion, PEO could solve a significant number of the ethical problems it faces if it would simply implement a system that ensures that engineers are adequately compensated for the work they perform and the risks and liabilities they assume. I've heard all the crap about the government not allowing PEO to set minimum fees for engineers, and it's just that—crap. Certainly, it can't be that difficult to make governments and the general public realize that engineers are worth more to society than hamburger flippers. However, it seems that PEO can't figure out how to do that.

If PEO is afraid or too lazy to take on the government, so be it. But how about doing things like setting up a system that gives engineers some backup in trying to collect fees from deadbeat clients, for example. It's bad enough that our fees are laughable. It has now become the industry standard to withhold payment to engineers in the construction industry for at least 90 days and, in some cases, indefinitely. We can't withhold services because of our ethical duty to protect the public. All of the cards are stacked against us.

The Lien Act is a joke. We have nowhere to turn and our clients know it. You can't expect to have the best people in this profession if you refuse to address the issue of adequate compensation.

PEO has created the environment that does not give engineers a fighting chance against unprofessional people. Our hands and feet are tied with a ridiculous number of ethical and legal constraints. We are supposed to be making a good living. Instead, we are forced to compete with engineers cutting corners, fees, and each others' throats, because the only way to make money is by volume and speed in an environment that PEO has permitted to exist.

PEO continues to heap more and more responsibility onto engineers, but it doesn't concern itself with the fact that no additional compensation will be given to engineers for these additional responsibilities. Any erosion of the *Professional Engineers Act* is, in my opinion, the fault of PEO.

Blaming engineers and punishing them by adding even more legislation is going to accomplish nothing. PEO has legislated us to death, and words are becoming meaningless. We are now in survival mode—start picking on someone else.

*Dave Tipler, P.Eng.
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Cover story

Approximately half the time my copy of *Engineering Dimensions* arrives as cover only. In fact, as I was looking through the May/June 2002 issue to get your address for this letter the cover came off. Of course any issues in plastic sleeves are satisfactory. It's debatable whether the major problem lies with Canadian or U.S. postal sorting machines. Yours is the only Canadian publication I receive. I get several U.S. publications mailed in a similar manner, but they all use a heavier grade of paper for the cover.

*Hugh Mackenzie, P.Eng.
Post Falls, ID*

Thanks for the feedback. We received a few letters complaining about the covers getting ripped. Holding this issue, you will have already noticed that we have a heavier stock to cover our Act, or at least the stories pertaining to it, which we hope will reduce the incidences of torn covers. We work hard on the cover designs, and we would like all our readers to see them!

E.D.

Letters to the editor are welcomed, but should be no more than 300 words and are subject to editing. Publication is at the editor's discretion; unsigned letters will not be published. The ideas expressed do not necessarily reflect the opinions and policies of the association, nor does the association assume responsibility for the opinions expressed. All letters pertaining to a current PEO issue are also forwarded to the appropriate committee for information. Address letters to jbailey@peo.on.ca