



POLICY CENTRE REFLECTS NEW CONFIDENCE IN ENGINEERS' CIVIC POTENTIAL

Created in response to PEO's efforts to forge more positive government relations, the Ontario Centre for Engineering and Public Policy looks to extend P.Eng. engagement to new levels.

BY MICHAEL MASTROMATTEO

The Hon. Glen Murray, MPP, now minister of the environment and climate change, spoke at the 2011 Public Policy Conference as then minister of research and innovation.

The Ontario Centre for Engineering and Public Policy (OCEPP) was devised in 2007 as an offshoot of PEO's stepped-up government relations.

Fresh off a successful legal challenge of the Ontario housing ministry's jurisdiction to impose an examination regime on licensed practitioners through the building code, PEO felt it only appropriate to attempt to harness the technical expertise of its members on the provincial government's behalf in guiding new policy initiatives that would benefit from this expertise. It was expected that by creating a policy centre, the government would look to PEO and engineers as a trusted partner in helping develop public policy, especially as it involves such issues as energy, infrastructure renewal, environmental sustainability, transportation and risk management.

OCEPP was also abetted in its birth with lingering concerns that input from engineers was largely absent in the policy development realm.

As early as 2004, for example, Tom Brzustowski, P.Eng., former president, Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada, told PEO members gathering for their annual general meeting that professional engineers are rarely seen or heard from in developing policy or creating innovation strategies.

Officially launched in 2008, OCEPP's mandate was to develop policy papers and position statements, act as a think tank research centre and provide information and encouragement for engineers with political ambitions. It was also charged with making viable connections with universities, engineering organizations, professional associations and government.

To publicize its work, OCEPP introduced *The Journal of Policy Engagement* as an insert in *Engineering Dimensions* magazine. Later, the journal became an annual compilation of the articles published in the magazine's Policy Engagement section.

At the time of its creation, it was thought OCEPP would eventually become independent of PEO, with the regulator being just one of many participating organizations with an interest in this area. When success in this goal proved difficult to achieve within a reasonable timeframe, PEO council re-evaluated the association's

commitment to OCEPP and, at its September 2010 meeting, decided OCEPP should remain a PEO department, focusing on regulatory issues, and subject to review by council each November. By early 2011, OCEPP was integrated into the policy and professional affairs unit of PEO's tribunals and regulatory affairs division, its emphasis shifting gradually to PEO regulatory policy development rather than public policy issues or government relations.

Shortly after its creation, OCEPP began delivering on its initial aim of providing policy recommendations and engineering solutions to government. In addition to annual policy conferences attracting high-profile speakers, the centre instituted its policy engagement series of presentations on issues ranging from urban infrastructure to cyber security.

EXCHANGE OF IDEAS

Catherine Shearer-Kudel, former program manager of OCEPP, says the policy engagement events gave engineers an opportunity to mingle with policy development experts from government, academe and industry.

"Their biggest impact, I would say, is getting engineers in the same room and talking with Ontario government policy people, as well as association heads, business leaders and others, to discuss important issues, such as energy, climate change, health, infrastructure and transportation," Shearer-Kudel says.

It wasn't long before government leaders and the academic community took notice of OCEPP's work. At the 2010 engineering reception at Queen's Park, former attorney general Chris Bentley described OCEPP as "a remarkable centre for delivering practical ideas for some of the solutions the government needs."

One of the most interesting developments arising from the centre's early policy engagement talks was the creation of a study group to review the viability of using partially spent nuclear reaction fuel as a source of new energy generation. Inspired by the work of Professor Peter Ottensmeyer, PhD, of the University of Toronto, the study group produced a paper on the use of fast-neutron reactors and fuel reprocessing as an input to public policy development for the energy sector.

GOING FORWARD

Today, OCEPP is guided by an advisory board led by Professor Brian Surgenor, PhD, P.Eng., of Queen's University. The 10-member board includes representation from universities, professional associations, the Ontario Society of Professional Engineers, government, industry and even graduate students.

Although OCEPP has but a seven-year history, its influence is spreading throughout Ontario's engineering community. "The impact of policy work can easily take 10, 15 or more years to be felt, and the centre has only been operating since late 2008," Shearer-Kudel says. "It can be difficult to ascertain what influenced a decision, at what stage of policy development the decision was impacted, and to what degree."

She adds that many engineers now practising have had little, if any, training in policy, and it can be difficult for them to appreciate the complex nature of today's policy development.



Clockwise from top left: Bernard Ennis, P.Eng., OCEPP director (standing), moderates a panel discussion on the future of high-rise buildings at the 2012 Public Policy Conference. Panel participants included, left to right, John Straube, PhD, P.Eng., Tim Gorley and Mark Brook, P.Eng.

Tim Hudak, MPP, former leader of the Ontario PC party, with former PEO president Diane Freeman, P.Eng., FEC, at the 2010 Public Policy Conference.

Former PEO CEO/registrar Kim Allen, P.Eng., FEC (left), with Franklin Holtforster, P.Eng., PMP, president and CEO, MHPM Project Managers Inc., at the 2010 Public Policy Conference.

“I think it’s important to recognize that many people and groups influence policy-making, including policy advisors working in government offices, municipalities or other governments,” Shearer-Kudel says. “It’s not just those at the senior levels who exert influence. Individual citizens and interest groups can make or break policy decisions.”

SPECIAL ROLE

Bernard Ennis, P.Eng., PEO’s director, policy and professional affairs, in 2011 was given the additional role of director of OCEPP. In that latter role, Ennis has had several occasions to outline the special role the centre can play. At the most recent OCEPP policy conference, for example, Ennis speculated on how engineers might become even more engaged in public policy development.

“Policy-makers do rely on engineers to provide the data and information needed to support [policy] options,” Ennis said. “Yet those options are typically formulated well in advance of any engagement on

the issue by engineers, even though an engineering perspective could often radically alter the understanding of the problem.”

Ennis has repeatedly urged engineers interested in policy work to “incorporate the mechanisms used by other policy-makers into their own way of thinking.” One of OCEPP’s ongoing challenges will be to seek new ways to combine engineering with public policy engagement. A second challenge is to avoid the scenario in which technically superior ideas are ignored simply because of engineers’ failure to recognize that pertinent non-technical issues play an important role in the public policy process.

But with a seven-year track record to draw on, OCEPP’s advisory board is keen to maintain the engineering-public policy momentum. This burden may be lightened with the rise of new university programs dedicated to linking engineering and public policy and governments’ heightened awareness, through PEO’s government liaison efforts, that including a technical perspective early in the development of relevant public policy can yield a better final result. Σ