

## [ EDITOR'S NOTE ]

### INDIVIDUALS HAVE A ROLE IN MAINTAINING PUBLIC TRUST IN THE PROFESSION



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THE JUNE 2012 collapse of the Algo Centre Mall in Elliot Lake and the subsequent inquiry led a number of commentators in the media and elsewhere to ruminate on the culpability of the engineering profession in the disaster.

Some media outlets, in their treatment of the tragedy and its aftermath, suggested the mall collapse invited a crisis of public confidence in Ontario's engineers and their work.

PEO took exception to such a broad brush reaction and led efforts in this magazine and elsewhere to emphasize that the engineering profession was actively taking steps to improve the regulatory safety regime for building inspections in the province. Following the tragedy, PEO worked closely with the Elliott Lake Commission of Inquiry, which endorsed almost all of the 11 recommendations made in the association's submission to the commission.

This was similar in nature to the Walkerton tainted water outbreak of May 2000, in which seven innocent people died after consuming improperly treated drinking water. Although engineers had less presence in the Walkerton case, the disaster brought out the old saw that no one notices engineering at work (or not properly at work) unless something terrible happens.

As a profession that is committed to protecting the public interest, engineers have more than a casual interest in the public perception of the profession as it pertains to fulfilling its public safety imperative.

PEO President George Comrie, P.Eng., FEC, touched on these concerns in an earlier President's Message column, when he cited ethics and personal responsibility as key to professionalism ("Risk, accountability, and public trust," *Engineering Dimensions*, July/August 2016, p. 3): "When I think of the serious public consequences of the engineering work that is taking place daily out of sight and mind of most members of the public, I find it ironic that a government zeros

in on dishonest real estate agents as putting the public at risk," Comrie wrote, referring to a recent move by the British Columbia government to end self-regulation of realtors. "We are running out of time to educate the public at large, and lawmakers in particular, of the critical role engineering plays in their day-to-day lives, and of the many ways professional engineers are safeguarding them and protecting their interest."

It is with these thoughts in mind that we turn our attention in this issue to the question of public confidence in Ontario engineering. One of the additional objects of the *Professional Engineers Act* is to "promote public awareness of the role of the Association (PEO)." This supports the principal object of regulating the profession and governing members "in order that the public interest may be served and protected."

Take a good look at the main feature article ("Inspiring confidence," p. 43) in this issue to learn about some of the things the regulator is doing to promote public confidence in engineering, namely by way of producing performance standards and practice guidelines, ensuring regulatory compliance and, to some extent, outreach to the public and to government policy makers.

But often it comes down to the individual practitioner's integrity and sense of right that gives meaning and strength to any regulatory safety system. Again, as President Comrie reminds us, engineers "must hold ourselves to a higher standard of ethical behaviour than the average member of the public if we hope to maintain public trust." Σ

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