

Collapses prompt call for stepped up engineering oversight

By Michael Mastromatteo

PEO'S PRESIDENT has recommended creating a provincial engineer position to help guard against a repeat of incidents similar to the June 23 tragedy in Elliot Lake.

In a July 20 letter to Ontario Premier Dalton McGuinty, PEO President Denis Dixon, P.Eng., FEC, says a provincial engineer "could take overall authority for engineering works in the province, to provide specific direction in the event of situations like Elliot Lake, and to ascertain whether such situations are indicative of systemic problems."

Dixon's letter was in response to the sudden collapse of the Algo Centre Mall in the northern Ontario community of Elliot Lake, which killed two local residents, and to the collapse of a stage tower just prior to a June 16 concert in Downsview Park in Toronto. The stage collapse resulted in the death of a drum technician employed by British rock group Radiohead.

In his letter to the Ontario premier, Dixon points out that responsibility for building safety and maintenance is transferred from engineers to the property owner once a building project is completed.

"A professional engineer is required to design and supervise most building and infrastructure projects. But when the project is completed, responsibility is transferred to the owner, along with documentation to operate and repair the facility going forward," Dixon says. "There is no requirement that the owner be able to understand this technical information, or that the owner retain a person with such knowledge. Over time, wear and tear and/or depreciation can take a toll on a facility and, in the absence of technical oversight, problems can occur."

Dixon says that in an ideal setting, every owner would have a consultant retained or protocol in place to occasionally reassess the structural soundness of the owner's facility.

"While many owners do have significant engineering support to ensure optimum continuing service conditions, there are others who appear to be short-sighted about maintenance and repairs," he says. "This is a problem that Professional Engineers Ontario recognizes, but is outside its current jurisdiction under the *Professional Engineers Act* to remedy."

PEO generally offers to help investigators whenever there is a broad public interest or safety concern that may involve engineering, and has offered to assist the Ontario Ministry of Labour in its investigation of the Downsview Park stage collapse.

Linda Latham, P.Eng., PEO's deputy registrar, regulatory compliance, says the regulator is pleased to assist the ministry's investigation of the stage tower collapse, and to find out if engineering work was carried out by appropriately licensed individuals and organizations.

PEO is on record as saying the stage collapse may highlight a lack of permitting systems for stage construction.

In July, the Ontario government named Mr. Justice Paul R. Bélanger to lead a public inquiry into the Elliot Lake collapse.



SPREADING THE WORD ABOUT PEO'S ROLE

Eight interns from the Ontario legislature visited PEO headquarters June 22 for an annual open forum about PEO and engineering. Sponsored by PEO's Government Liaison Program (GLP), the forum enables legislative interns to learn more about the role of PEO in the licensing and regulation of professional engineering in the province. The forum was hosted by PEO Enforcement Officer Marisa Sterling, P.Eng., and included presentations by representatives of PEO's Government Liaison Committee and the Ontario Centre for Engineering and Public Policy (OCEPP). Established in 1975, the Ontario Legislature Internship Programme (OLIP) partners recent university graduates with backbench MPPs at Queen's Park to learn more about governance and policy-making. The program also allows participants to supplement their university studies by writing an academic paper on a public policy topic of their choice. Seated (left to right) are interns Lauren Hanna, Sylvia Pena, Humera Jabir and Belinda Ellsworth. Standing are Patrick DeRochie, Evan Akriotis, Diego Ortiz and Sylvia Kim.