

Florida's Move Toward Structural Licensure

By Scott D. Martin, PE, LEED AP BD+C

The move toward structural licensure is well underway in the state of Florida. The Florida Structural Engineers Association (FSEA) will be proposing legislation to the Florida Senate and House of Representatives in 2015 to establish the SE license.

Many articles have appeared in various publications making the case for structural licensure. Arguments have been offered for this additional level of accreditation due to the complexity of current building codes compared to decades past, decreasing redundancies and safety factors, the reduction in educational degree requirements in a field that has become more specialized, and the potential for loss of human life should a structure fail. Readers of this magazine mostly understand this. ASCE, CASE, NCSEA, and NCEES have all agreed that an enhanced 16-hour exam focused on structures is the best path forward. However, in arguing for change in statewide engineering licensing laws, there are other engineering groups that need to be brought into the discussion.

The Florida Engineering Society (FES), an affiliate of the National Society of Professional Engineers (NSPE), is the largest group of engineers in the state comprising all engineering disciplines. FSEA first approached FES in 2010 to educate its board of directors regarding the issue of SE licensure and the plan that FSEA had at that time for amending state law. The FES Professional Concerns Committee explored the issue further and presented a position paper to the FES board of directors in favor of SE licensure. The official FES position statement adopted by its board in 2011 identified the “need for an additional Structural Engineer license for the practice of structural engineering for the design of buildings that exceed the [Florida] threshold limit.”

The Florida Institute of Consulting Engineers (FICE) is an affiliate of the American Council of Engineering Companies (ACEC), and its members include the largest engineering firms operating in the state. FSEA approached the FICE board of directors in 2012, but by this time ill-informed rumors had begun circulating that structural engineers were looking to create their own license. Understandably, the FICE board was reluctant to express a position without further information. The FICE Structural Committee was tasked to explore the issue and develop a position paper. Simultaneously, FSEA worked to publish educational articles in two state periodicals that reach out to all engineering disciplines – the *FES Journal* and the *FBPE Connection*. In February 2014, the FICE board of directors approved its Structural Committee’s position paper, which supported “a Structural Engineering (SE) license in Florida for engineers practicing structural engineering for structures above a certain threshold.”

With the recent publications in statewide journals, NSPE became more aware of the growing initiative in Florida and publically renewed its opposition to SE licensure. A letter published in the *FES Journal* reiterated the national organization's long-held position that the PE license should be “the defining qualification for practice” as an engineer, and that “a PE who is not fully competent to perform structural engineering is already ethically obligated not to do so.” Some engineering groups within FES and FICE still question the

need for a discipline-specific license, but to date FES and FICE have not reversed their position statements in favor of SE licensure.

The Florida Board of Professional Engineers (FBPE) is the public agency that regulates engineering in the state of Florida. When FSEA approached FBPE in 2013 about establishing the SE license, FBPE created an ad-hoc committee that was “tasked with the mission of investigating, evaluating and making recommendations regarding separate licensure and/or certification of structural engineers within the state of Florida.” The committee was made up of five FBPE board members plus representatives of FSEA, ASCE-SEI, and FES/FICE. After multiple meetings and discussions, the committee came to the conclusions that the SE “license” would be needed – i.e., “certification” would not be sufficient – and that changes to the law would indeed be required. All members of the committee had input on the proposed statute language, and in June 2014 the entire FBPE endorsed the following approach.

In 2015, FSEA will attempt to have the Florida Statutes amended to establish the SE license, which would be obtained after licensure as a PE. Under the FSEA proposal, the applicant for the SE license would need to have passed the 16-hour NCEES Structural exam and show four years of active structural engineering experience. The 16-hour exam would also qualify as the exam for PE licensure, which could be applied for simultaneously. However, before the 2017 PE renewal period, Florida PEs who sign an affidavit attesting that they have been practicing structural engineering for at least four years will not need to pass the 16-hour exam to apply. All buildings over a certain threshold, which will be defined by FBPE, will need to be designed by a licensed SE. All structures below that threshold may be designed by a licensed PE as currently required by Florida law.

At the beginning of this process, none of the board members of FSEA fully grasped what the proper path forward was to enacting SE licensure, or for that matter any legislation that would affect so many that had not been directly involved in crafting the discussion. Only by actively working with all of the stakeholders, as well as fully educating any others who may be even remotely affected by such a change, has it been possible to move forward confidently with making SE licensure a reality in Florida.

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