



Getting Motivated for SE Licensure

By Thomas A. Grogan Jr., P.E., S.E., SECB

Many states already have some form of structural engineering (SE) practice restriction, but if you live in a state without one, you might be asking yourself what it takes to start one. The Florida Structural Engineers Association (FSEA) decided just over two years ago that Florida should look into SE licensure, but only after some very healthy debate among our board members. We asked ourselves: Would our membership support this worthy cause? What would it take to get there? From whom could we elicit help?

Though we had the backing of NCSEA, if our members were not in favor of SE licensure, then we would be dead in the water. We did several things to address this concern. First, we had two of our board members join the NCSEA Licensing Committee and spend some time learning what other Member Organizations around the country were doing in this area. Of particular interest were the recent successes in Washington and Utah. Those committee members also attended national licensing summits to learn which other professional organizations were for and against SE licensure. Second, we polled our membership and were pleased to learn that over 80% were in support of SE licensure. This provided the impetus to start the process in earnest. Third, we formed our own state SE licensure committee, which I currently chair, and it now has over a dozen members.

At the first meeting of this committee, which was attended by over twenty engineers, we heard from two members of the NCSEA Licensing Committee: Susie Jorgensen, the chair, and Barry Arnold, the person behind the scenes who helped get the SE practice restriction in Utah. Susie shared with us the status of SE licensure and its importance in our profession's over-arching mission to protect the safety, health and welfare of the public. This was followed by Barry's passionate presentation on why he became involved and the work of his committee in Utah.

Several of the FSEA committee members were not enthusiastic about SE licensure at first; but they ended up becoming vital contributors to our progress. They played devil's advocate and challenged Susie, Barry and the other members, to the point where we were not sure that we had enough support from within our committee. Though initially quite frustrating, this became valuable over the next several months as we worked hard to convince these individuals that this was a worthy cause for which we needed not only their support, but also their help. That initial meeting unified the committee; and we voted to continue pursuit of SE licensure. We have continued to meet almost every month since.

Using Utah as a model, we decided that we needed to write a white paper outlining why SE licensure was important for Florida. We gathered all of our facts, including information on several collapses in Florida over the past 20 years, attributed to poor design. We also learned that over 80% of the complaints filed with our Florida Board of Professional Engineers (FBPE) were structural issues. This was very enlightening and motivated the committee to take their work to the next level. From the white paper, we drafted and published a one-page document that explained very briefly why we were

pursuing this goal. In addition, we formed several subcommittees: legislation, advocacy, and marketing. Momentum was starting to build.

When pursuing any legislation, it is important to know who will support you and who might be against you. The Florida Engineering Society (FES), an affiliate of the National Society of Professional Engineers (NSPE), is the predominant engineering organization in our state, with strong connections to the legislature and paid lobbyists. We realized that having their support would be critical to our success.

Two of our licensure committee members are also members of FES, so they began the discussion of separate licensure at FES state meetings. The FES board believed that our request warranted their review and charged their Professional Concerns Committee with carrying it out. After careful assessment of our white paper and one-page document, the Professional Concerns Committee wrote a position paper indicating that they were in complete support of this initiative, as long as it applied only to Threshold Buildings as already defined by state law and would be a post-licensure credential. This was extremely good news, and several of us were invited to their next state board meeting to participate in a discussion, after which they voted on the issue. Although the discussion was heated and contentious, at the conclusion, the FES board passed a motion indicating they would support SE licensure and offered support to FSEA in working with the legislature. FSEA has reciprocated by offering to support FES on other initiatives that they are pursuing.

Since that time, FSEA has written a revision to the state law that would recognize structural engineering as a specific discipline and give the FBPE the ability to define the types of structures to which practice restrictions would apply. However, at the moment we are in a holding pattern, as Governor Rick Scott has asked that no new legislation be initiated unless it immediately creates jobs. We intend to begin again in earnest toward the middle of 2012; but we will be contacting FES to determine what lobbying support they are willing to provide.

Though we still have a ways to go, we believe that our committee is motivated and ready to address all the obstacles to obtaining SE licensure. It is this motivation that will be critical to our success in this endeavor.



NCSEA Continuing Education in February

February 7 webinar: Design Considerations for Exterior Wall Interfaces in Steel-Framed Buildings by Patrick McManus

February 10-11: NCSEA Winter Institute on Soft Soil – Water and Wind, Hotel Monteleone, New Orleans, LA

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