

## Grandfathering

Transitioning Toward a Structural Engineering License

By Barry Arnold, S.E., SECB

**M**any states stand on the threshold of two great opportunities. First is the opportunity to implement changes to their current engineering licensure laws to include the definition of a structural engineer and define the credentials that someone must have in order to use that title. Second is the opportunity to transition currently licensed professional engineers toward separate structural engineering licensure and minimize the impact on any individual person or business. Because much has already been written about the former, this article will deal primarily with the latter issue.

As states see the advantages of structural licensing, many engineers are asking an important question: "How is the change in the licensure law going to affect me?" The correct answer is: "Not at all." To ensure that this is the case, providing a transition (or "grandfathering") clause is an important part of successfully implementing changes to a state's licensure laws.

The purpose of structural licensing is to raise the bar by requiring structural engineers in the future to pass the NCEES Structural Engineering (SE) examination, in addition to or in lieu of one of the other NCEES Principles & Practice of Engineering examinations. Each state has the right to decide how to implement a structural engineering license within the framework of its current licensure laws. All states that adopt structural licensing should consider having some form of transition clause. The definition of a transition clause is the ability of qualified professionals to continue practicing without conforming to the revised examinations, education, and/or experience requirements. The transition clause is the easiest way to give those who believe that they are competent to practice structural engineering, and who have been practicing structural engineering in the past, the opportunity to acquire the title of structural engineer.

Each state can determine what its transition clause will say, and most states are opting for something as simple as having the applicants sign an affidavit. This is usually a legal

declaration by the applicants that they are competent and capable to practice structural engineering.

It is important to understand that the engineers in each state can and should have a huge impact in deciding what the transition clause will require. NCSEA has no specific recommendations regarding the content of the transition clause; however, it is imperative that the process for developing it be fair, equitable and open. All interested parties must be consulted and their input seriously considered.

The transition clause should not be used as a means to weed out questionable engineers, or otherwise restrict anyone from acquiring the title of structural engineer or restrict those currently practicing. Rather, it should be viewed as a chance to recognize the achievements of those currently practicing by reaching out, embracing, and helping those who want to acquire the title structural engineer, and welcoming them to the higher standard.

Two troubling issues arise as a result of having a transition clause. First, some engineers who are perhaps undeserving of the title of structural engineer, through a lack of education and/or experience, will be permitted to use that title. Second, those engineers who have already taken the NCEES SE examination or its past counterparts may object to the fact that other engineers are being allowed to transition in so "easily".

Regarding the first issue – because the transition clause leaves the door wide open, so to speak, it is likely that some engineers will make use of the opportunity to acquire the title of structural engineer even though they have not legitimately earned it through education and/or experience. This is an unfortunate loophole, and there is no easy way to fix it. However, one should recognize that even without a transition clause, this individual would still be allowed to practice structural engineering. Instead of focusing on negative aspects of the issue, perhaps it is best to acknowledge that there will be numerous well-educated and highly experienced engineers who will utilize the transition clause, and the structural engineering profession will benefit greatly from their ongoing presence and

contributions. Additionally, time and scrutiny have a way of determining who is competent and capable to practice structural engineering regardless of anyone's self-assessment of ability.

Regarding the second issue – there are, in reality, two types of structural engineering examinations. Some have opted to study hard, pay the testing fees, and take the NCEES SE exam; its predecessors, the NCEES SE I and SE II exams; the Western States SE exam; and/or a state-specific SE exam. Those who have gone this route are to be commended and congratulated for their efforts. Those individuals often benefit by other states recognizing their achievements through reciprocity. Others have also engaged in an enormous amount of study and sacrifice – personal, as well as financial – to pass a different kind of examination. A lengthy career in the structural engineering profession is a challenge that has no equal among the written engineering tests available today. Both types of examinations should be considered equivalent – not identical, but certainly equivalent. In other words, if you have passed the NCEES SE examination or something like it, you should embrace and welcome the transitioned engineers as your equals.

One of the unfortunate consequences of having a transition clause is that the full effect of structural licensing will not be felt for some years. That is a sacrifice what we should all be willing to make to raise the bar for the structural engineering profession in the future.

We also should keep in mind that the purpose of structural licensing is not to create a group of elitist snobs. An open and fair transition clause will demonstrate our willingness to work together and our desire to create a better future for our profession. The push toward structural licensing in all states should be viewed for what it is: an expression of our desire to serve our clients better, and fulfill our ethical obligation to hold paramount the safety, health, and welfare of the public. ■

*Barry Arnold, S.E., SECB is a Vice President at ARW Engineers in Ogden, Utah ([barrya@arwengineers.com](mailto:barrya@arwengineers.com)). He is a Past President of the Structural Engineers Association of Utah (SEAU), serves as the SEAU Delegate to NCSEA, and is a member of the NCSEA Board of Directors and the NCSEA Licensing Committee.*

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