

# NOTES FROM THE EDITOR



Scott L. Melnick

## The Professional Practice of Engineering

Delegates from 34 local structural engineering associations gathered in Chicago recently for the annual meeting of the National Council of Structural Engineers Associations (NCSEA). If you're looking for information on the structural engineering profession, there's no better place than this gathering (likewise, if you're looking for practical steel design information, there's no better place than the North American Steel Construction Conference; and if you're looking for highly academic presentations there's no better place than the ASCE/SEI Structure's Congress).

While most of the presentations were generally interesting, the real meat of the meeting focused on the controversial issue of certification for structural engineers. Supporters of certification believe it is a method of self-regulation that will help elevate the stature of the profession—and will ultimately lead to separate S.E. licensure in all states (currently, 10 U.S. jurisdictions provide licensure for structural engineers). Opponents say that since there would be no legal backing behind certification it is simply an unnecessary expense—and judging by certification programs in other professions, it won't come cheaply.

For me (and remember, I'm simply an interested observer and not a structural engineer), the issue will partly come down to the engineering community's financial support for the program. First, will NCSEA devote the dollars needed to develop both the testing and training material needed to initiate the program? Second, will NCSEA devote the dollars to market the program—not just to structural engineers, but also to owners, contractors, architects, and even the general public?

Delegates to the annual meeting voted to "accept the certification committee's consensus model as the basis for further development of a certification program"—in other words, to keep looking at the possibility of certification. That's probably the right decision for now—at least until a solid proposal is presented that answers the question of what the program will cost and who will pay for it.

## Dangerous Speech

While everyone is in favor (or at least claims to be in favor) of free speech, the Supreme Court recognizes that some speech is prohibited (such as falsely shouting "fire!" in a crowded theater). But lately, my

belief in free speech has been challenged by some pretty stupid journalism.

The most outlandish piece originated in the *New York Post*, which falsely claimed that an MIT study blamed the World Trade Center collapse on the use of a single-bolt connection between the floor framing and exterior wall framing (MIT has sent a response to the *Post* blasting them for erroneous reporting). As AISC's V.P. of Engineering and Research pointed out in his letter to the *New York Post*, "it has been clearly and conclusively established that the structural connection between the floor framing and the wall framing was a more-than-adequate welded gusset plate. The bolts were present only for the purposes of a temporary connection during construction. Criticisms of the bolted connection and depictions of the trusses and floor collapsing individually, though widely depicted early on, are simply distractions from the truth." Normally I wouldn't be all worked up by an article in a trashy tabloid; unfortunately, the story was picked up by the AP News Service and reprinted in publications throughout the country. Please, when you speak with a reporter from a newspaper, be aware that they don't have a technical background and will often pick one item from your statement to report—often distorting the meaning of what you're saying.

If you speak to the press, make sure you present the information clearly. Otherwise, you might end up making statements such as a recent one from a well-known blast researcher. He reported that buildings designed to the current seismic code could fail when attacked with explosives. Yes, and cars designed for highway use often sink when driven into a river. His irresponsible statements neglect to inform reporters that engineers today are designing for blast resistance—when the owner puts that in the project criteria. They are not just blindly applying seismic design criteria in the hopes that the blast effects will somehow be handled.

Don't stop talking to the press. The public needs to hear from the technical community. But take the time to make sure the reporter understands what you're talking about. And if you are misrepresented, follow up with a letter to the editor. It's important that the engineering community leads in any technical discussion.

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