

February 16, 2012

Apprenticeship ratios stifle competition in construction: Progressive Contractors Association of Canada

Visits with Eastern Ontario contractors highlights ratio issues

GREG MECKBACH

digital media editor

The restrictions on the employment of apprentices in Ontario and shortages of qualified journeymen in some regions, makes the construction industry less competitive, according to the Progressive Contractors Association of Canada.

Sean Reid, the PCA's regional director for Ontario, said in an interview, he has met with contractors from Eastern Ontario who are not bidding on some large jobs due to mandatory journeyman-to-apprentice ratios. He would not name the contractors.

"I met with a number of contractors in the electrical as well as plumbing and mechanical trades," he said.

"They would like to be able to fill out their workforce with more apprentices to ramp up the scale of their workforce and compete for larger projects, but the ratios don't allow them to do this, especially in regions where it's harder to find skilled journeymen like eastern Ontario and northern Ontario"

Reid added this is especially true for firms with 20 to 30 employees located outside of the Greater Toronto Area who want to increase the size of their companies.

"They can't easily ramp up the scope of their workforce to be able to confidently bid on larger scale jobs," Reid said.

"What these high apprentice ratios really do is stifle competition. They prop up artificial barriers for new entrants into these markets in terms of being able to take on larger projects."

Reid was referring to the ratios mandated in the Ontario Trades Qualification and Apprenticeship Act. There is a regulation associated with each trade with mandatory ratios.

For example, Ontario Regulation 1073 stipulates the limit on the number of apprentices employed by a certified plumber, who is limited to employing one apprentice for every journeyman, plus an additional apprentice for every three journeyman employed by the employer in the trade and with whom the apprentice is working.

Other trades with mandatory journeyman-to-apprentice ratios include: electrician; refrigeration and air conditioning mechanic; brick and stone mason; cement mason; cement finisher; boilermaker; drywall, acoustic and lathing applicator; drywall finisher and plasterer; millwright; floor covering installer; general carpenter; architectural glass and metal mechanic; heat and frost insulator; hoisting engineer (both mobile crane and tower crane operators); ironworkers; painters; reinforcing rodworker; restoration mason; roofer; steamfitter; sprinkler and fire protection installer; and terrazzo, tile and marble setter.

Apprenticeship ratios in skilled trades was one issue in last fall's general election in Ontario.

Last May, Progressive Conservative Leader Tim Hudak promised that if elected, he would establish one-to-one ratios, but critics contend that reducing the ratios can cause safety hazards and contractors may try to save money by hiring apprentices when journeymen are actually available.

The new Ontario College of Trades, which was established as a result of a report by Tim Armstrong to the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities, has a mandate to review ratios.

Ron Johnson, chair of the board of governors for the College, previously told the Daily Commercial News that he hopes the 34 trades with ratios will be reviewed within the first two years of the College's operation. At the time, he said anyone who has an issue may come forward and make their case to a review panel.

Reid wouldn't say whether PCA has held any specific discussions with the College on apprenticeship ratios.

"We will continue to advocate for lower ratios in whatever forum exists," he said.

"We're monitoring very closely the work and development of the College of Trades."

Reid emphasized he was speaking on behalf of PCA and not on behalf of a coalition that last fall advocated for either the abolition or overhaul of the College. The coalition consisted of associations representing employers.

This was in response to a report by Cardus that concluded the College was flawed.

Cardus claimed the College is redundant with other regulatory bodies, there is no research-based evidence showing it would solve problems in skilled trades, the governance structure is biased in favour of compulsory certified trades and it will become a "massive bureaucracy."

In addition to PCA, the coalition that called for abolition or major overhaul of the College of Trades included the Ontario Road Builders Association, the Ontario General Contractors Association, the Ontario Sewer and Watermain Construction Association, the Heavy Construction Association of Toronto and **RESCON**.