

Bill would raise bar for engineers

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Wisconsin's procedure for licensing professional engineers is, at least according to one state lawmaker, "suspect." "Right now, there's confusion and conflicting language," said state Rep. Louis Molepske Jr., D-Stevens Point. "We need to clarify exactly what Wisconsin requires to put 'professional engineer' behind a name."

Molepske is leading that charge with a bill that would change the state's licensing procedure to require four years of study at approved engineering schools plus four years of engineering experience in preparation for managing projects before candidates could take a nationally administered exam. In lieu of four years of study, applicants could have two years of education from technical colleges followed by six years of experience before taking the test.

Wisconsin, like nearly every other state, requires an examination for licensure as a professional engineer, but it does not mandate that applicants have an educational component before taking the exam.

That puts the state at a competitive disadvantage with other states that require educational backgrounds, said Stanley Sugden, head of civil and municipal department work with Waukesha-based Ruekert & Mielke Inc. "This is something we want to see corrected," Sugden said. "It levels the playing field and provides the state with an opportunity to do a better job of protecting public health and safety."

A similar bill was introduced in the last legislative session by state Rep. Mark Gottlieb, R-Port Washington, and although it passed the Assembly and a state Senate committee, the bill failed to reach the Senate floor for a vote before the session ended.

Martin Hanson, vice president in the Eau Claire office of Ayres Associates Inc., said many lawmakers were confused by the bill and thought it would limit engineering opportunities at all levels, not just the professional engineer credentials. He said bipartisan support and clearer language could help the bill this time. But the bill was referred to the Assembly Committee on Labor in June and still awaits a hearing. Molepske said he expects one in September.

Gottlieb is the chief co-sponsor of Molepske's bill, and Molepske said the bill has the support of groups including Wisconsin technical colleges and the Wisconsin Transportation Builders Association Inc.

Widespread support is important when companies are expanding the territories in which they look for work, said Hanson, who also is chairman of the state's Joint Board of Architects, Landscape Architects, Professional Engineers, Designers and Land Surveyors. Many other states require examinations based on educational and field experience, so he said Wisconsin engineers can find themselves hard-pressed to find work outside the state. "It's comity or reciprocity," Hanson said. "You can get work here, but you're at a disadvantage when you try to do work in another state."

Sugden said he does not think the state's attempts to tighten the reins on professional engineer licensing will deter applicants from seeking registration. "We want to make sure there's the combination of education and real-world experience there," he said.

If anything, Molepske said engineers he talked to debated whether his bill went far enough. "It's the platinum standard," he said. "There are some people that would like to make the credentialing process as hard as possible. I'm deferring to engineers on that question, but as a lawmaker, I want to know where we are compared to our neighbors. "I'd like us to be near the top."