



James Raiswell, Editor

Good news for Gold Seal

When the Canadian Construction Association (CCA) launched its Gold Seal certification in 1993, its aim was to promote and recognize the highest standards of achievement for the industry's project managers, superintendents and estimators. At the time, however, the expectation surely must have been that the industry would promote this certification as the standard of choice and that Gold Seal would develop under its own momentum to become a national standard for construction excellence.

Unfortunately, for a variety of reasons, this has not been the case. Today, recognized Gold Seal Certificate holders across the country number just shy of 6,000 and growth in new holders, while steady, remains slow.

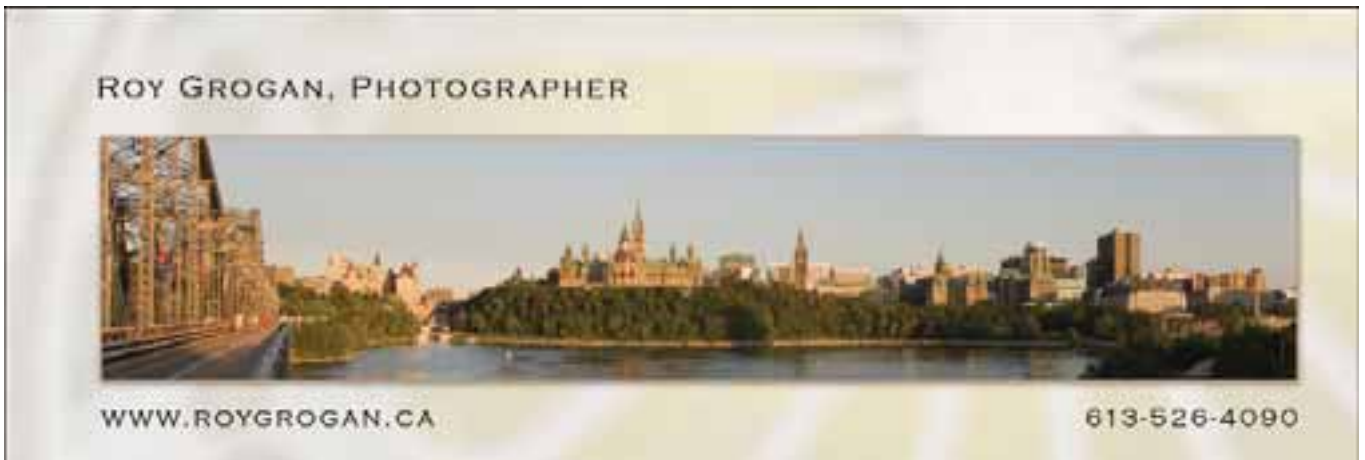
All this, however, may be changing, thanks in part to a motion in the B.C. interior, by the municipalities of Kamloops and Kelowna in particular, to require Gold Seal certification for project managers or site supervisors as a condition of contract for jobs valued at over \$2 million (and over \$1 million, beginning in January). (A move that mirrors one already in place for certain construction projects administered by the Province of New Brunswick.)

The decision came as a result of the poor administration of a handful of municipal projects by improperly qualified site supervisors and project managers which led municipal officials to consider implementing new standards for performance on the job site. Sensing this, the local industry lobbied extensively for the adoption of Gold Seal as the criterion of choice, because it is a standard created by the construction industry for its practitioners.

Not everyone, however, is in love with the idea of adding more regulation to a business that isn't short of regulations. Some are concerned that a lack of available certified talent will force up the price of construction and force Gold-Seal-certified workers to become a higher-priced commodity. To some extent, this has been addressed in the Kelowna and Kamloops contract documents which also allow for a Gold Seal Intern (someone who is not yet Gold-Seal-certified, but has submitted a letter of intent to achieve the designation within five years) to work on a site in the same manner as a fully certified worker would, but in the early stages of the contract administration, it's not hard to see how the value of Gold-Seal-certified workers could increase dramatically.

Is condition of contract a potential turning point for a sagging Gold Seal program? It could be, in the sense that it gives the industry a chance to demonstrate to its clients that it is moving towards ensuring the highest standards of professionalism in a business that can sometimes be called anything but.

Will it be a panacea for Gold Seal? It seems unlikely. For one, it would be very difficult to administer similar conditions across the country, largely because of the imbalance of certified workers in the country. Properly promoted, however, condition of contract could become a real feather in Gold Seal's cap and could help to push a moribund designation back to the forefront of the industry.



Condition of contract?



**Gold Seal certification is gathering momentum,
but not as you might expect**

There's a buzz about Gold Seal that's moving around the industry these days and it's coming from an unlikely source.

On August 1, the City of Kamloops and a handful of other public agencies in the province of British Columbia took the lead in making Gold Seal certification a mandatory condition of contract. That means that for every new city construction project valued at over \$2 million – and valued at over \$1 million beginning in January 2007 – at least the supervisor on the job site must be Gold Seal certified.

What's more, the trend is being carried across the B.C. interior, as the City of Kelowna and a handful of local school districts are expected to follow suit, in one form or another, in the coming months.

Helping to spearhead this move toward mandatory Gold Seal certification has been the Southern Interior Construction Association (SICA) of British Columbia and its president, Debra Hicks.

“We were hearing quite a few complaints from owners about the quality of the supervision of projects on some jobs and that was due to a lack of experienced supervisors, which in turn was due to a shortage of workers in the industry,” says Hicks. “It became clear to us that we needed to consider a new way of doing things in the business that could ensure quality and if we as an industry didn't move to guarantee quality, then the owners would.”

At that point, it became obvious that introducing Gold Seal as a condition of contract was the right way to go. In this sense, the industry was able to remain in the driver's seat with regard to delivering quality assurances to its clients, while construction owners were given a guarantee that a qualified, competent supervisor would run their construction jobs on a daily basis.

(Similarly, the government of New Brunswick has stipulated Gold Seal certification for project managers or superintendents as a condition of contract since 1996, this for capital projects valued at over \$1 million. Moreover, electrical and mechanical contractors must be similarly certified for projects valued at over \$400,000.)

The move could not have come at a better time for Gold Seal, which has been languishing in relative obscurity for the past five years. After an initial wave of enthusiasm for the new designation when it was introduced in 1993, growth in Gold Seal certification has slowed to some 200 or 300 new registrations annually, for just under 6,000 total certified practitioners across the country. At its annual conference in March, CCA opened the floor to debate about the future of Gold Seal and what could be done to revitalize the flagging program.

Bob Noseworthy, chair of the CCA's Gold Seal committee, says the move towards condition of contract administration has been a bonus for the program. It's not something that the committee has been advocating, per se, but he says the committee is encouraged by the fact that this is a new way to promote individual excellence on the job site.



Francis Pomerleau says he would support Gold Seal as a condition of contract, given certain conditions. Photo by Roy Grogan

“An owner has the right to want excellence on their job site and I'm convinced that if we don't position Gold Seal, a program we've built from the ground up, as the standard of choice, these buyers are going to demand one of a dozen other schemes that are not specific to the construction sector.”

Indeed, there is a particular argument among nay-sayers that holds that a P. Eng designation or the emerging PMI (Project Management Institute) certification may be more widely accepted standards of competency as far as construction buyers are concerned. The logic holds that these are established designations whose criteria are understood the world over and, as such, they mean more to an owner than a domestically created and administered standard for construction.

Hicks, however, wants nothing to do with that argument.

“These are different designations that involve different forms of training which are not specific to the construction industry and that is why they don't make sense as conditions of contract,” she says. “PMI isn't even related to construction and neither it nor P. Eng takes into account the realities of construction work: the safety and scheduling considerations, for example.”

“Gold Seal makes sense as a condition of contract because it was created with this industry in mind to promote excellence.”

Francis Pomerleau, vice-president of construction with Pomerleau Inc., says he is concerned that administering Gold Seal as a condition of contract too soon will lead to major problems in the industry, not the least of which is a lack of available Gold Seal-certified managers, supervisors and estimators to complete the available work, which in turn could force up the price of construction services.

“I think that until there is a critical mass of Gold Seals in certain jurisdictions, it isn’t the right thing to do. Another thing is that this is a system that is very hard to apply nationally. We have a lot of Gold Seals in Ontario and in the Maritimes and very few in Quebec and in the west, so as a condition of contract across the country, it doesn’t make sense.”

One of the ways in which this concern has been addressed in B.C., says Hicks, is through the Gold Seal Intern designation, which is where a superintendent, for example, submits a letter of intent to obtain Gold Seal certification in the next five years. This intern designation is sufficient for contracts administered by the City of Kamloops and accomplishes the two-fold goal of attracting more workers to the Gold Seal designation and meeting the requirements set out by the contracting authorities.

“Condition of contract is not a threat – it’s a reality we’re all facing,” says Noseworthy. “We have to be prepared to meet the demand that condition of contract creates. That means making our members aware of the importance of obtaining this designation and, more importantly, making the courses available to them and making the material current.”

To that end, Noseworthy says CCA is considering a number of options to make Gold Seal more accessible and more current to the industry. One way this will occur is through the Construction Sector Council, whose e-learning courses will be set up to carry Gold Seal courses, to make the process of keeping up to date with the course material easier for industry practitioners. A second would be through a Professional Gold Seal designation – something the committee is debating – that would require continuous education for those members, to ensure that they are abreast of the latest changes in industry practices.

But no matter the tactic, Noseworthy concedes that if Gold Seal is to continue and thrive in the coming years, more must be done by the industry to promote the program as the program of choice.

“We have to sell our program to owners, to the public, and not least, to association members. Gold Seal is the best and most comprehensive construction management certification program in the country. Let’s build on that asset.”

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