

New Skilled Trades Ontario praised by stakeholders

Don Wall May 12, 2021



Ontario’s construction stakeholders generally expressed universal support for the bold strokes of the Ontario government’s new direction on the skilled trades, with enthusiasm for the new Crown agency to be known as Skilled Trades Ontario (STO) tempered only by uncertainty as to what comes next.

Minister of Labour, Training and Skills Development (MLTSD) Monte McNaughton unveiled plans for STO to replace the embattled Ontario College of Trades (OCOT) on May 6. The new system, provided for in the Building Opportunities in the Skilled Trades Act, realigns responsibilities for the training, certification and enforcement of the skilled trades system in the province.

“We welcome a new agency that takes a fresh approach and genuine interest in advancing Ontario’s skilled trades and apprenticeship system,” said Stephen Hamilton, chair of the Ontario Skilled Trades Alliance.

“By establishing Skilled Trades Ontario, the province is helping connect employers with the tradespersons and apprentices they need, particularly as the economy recovers from the impacts of the pandemic,” commented Joe Vaccaro, CEO of the Ontario Home Builders’ Association.

McNaughton said he was implementing the first phase of the recommendations of the [Skilled Trades Panel](#), established last September with Michael Sherrard as chair. The panel is currently consulting on the second phase of its mandate, to focus on classification and training.

System oversight by MLTSD

Under the new system, STO would become the province's training authority to lead the promotion, research and development of apprenticeship training and curriculum standards. It will consolidate services including apprentice registration, issuance of certificates and renewals.

The MLTSD will provide system oversight, be responsible for regulatory decisions and financial supports, and take on responsibility for trade prescription and classification, compliance and enforcement.

"Mike Sherrard did a fantastic job of listening to everybody's concerns and coming up with a set of recommendations," said government relations associate for the Ontario General Contractors Association (OGCA) Erich Schmidt.

"We're very excited for the second phase of consultations to engage once again with our employer partners and build upon this collaboration."

"It's about time the focus shifted, with the emphasis on doing away with the bureaucratic maze and helping more people succeed in skilled trades careers," said Karen Renkema, vice-president, Ontario, of the Progressive Contractors Association of Canada. "We're delighted to close the chapter on OCOT and excited about working with the proposed new agency."

Council of Ontario Construction Associations (COCA) president Ian Cunningham said the realignment of responsibilities should reduce confusion experienced by apprentices and employers, who were "pinballed" between the ministry and OCOT.

As in all enabling legislation, "the devil will be in the details," Cunningham said. He said in his view the panel's recommendations appeared balanced and neutral, with the "sticky" decisions such as the classification of trades as voluntary or compulsory to be determined in the future after Sherrard's panel conducts future consultation.

"My general sense is that what has been proposed by Minister McNaughton is a compromise," said Cunningham.

Statements from the [Residential Construction Council of Ontario \(RESCON\)](#) and the **Residential and Civil Construction Alliance of Ontario (RCCAO)** also praised the government's attempts to streamline the apprenticeship system. RESCON president Richard Lyall stated the legislation would create clearer pathways for youths interested in pursuing an apprenticeship and would "help end the stigma around careers in construction."

RCCAO executive director Nadia Todorova said the tabling of the legislation was a “step in the right direction” in ensuring the development of the construction workforce Ontario needs.

Multiple ministry involvement

Ian Howcroft, CEO of Skills Ontario, praised the focus the government is placing on promoting the skilled trades and said he expects his organization will continue to play a complementary role, implementing programs set up by the ministry and STO as the new agency begins to establish itself.

“There’s going to be some interplay between the agency and the ministry, and that will also involve other ministries as well,” Howcroft said. “You know there is a role for the colleges in apprenticeships and skilled trades, there is a role for the Ministry of Education, but I think the new structure will allow for better understanding and more clarification and a clearer path of who’s responsible for what.”

Two union representatives, LIUNA international vice-president Joseph Mancinelli and James Barry, executive secretary treasurer of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers Construction Council of Ontario, also supported the government initiative. Mancinelli said the new system would eliminate red tape for apprenticeship training and modernize the skilled trades.

Both Barry and Patrick Dillon, business manager of the Provincial Building and Construction Trades Council of Ontario, said they believe the era of skill sets, with trades’ scopes of practice splintered off, is now over. Skills sets were introduced in schedule 40 of Bill 100, Dillon noted, but he has been reassured by the ministry in briefings that the plan has been abandoned.

The Building Trades had just received a copy of the new act on May 10 and had not yet confirmed whether the legislation supported the preservation of traditional skill sets, he said.

“I have to say that from the Building Trades’ perspective, if what we’ve been hearing works out to be the reality, moving away from skill sets back to compulsory, licensed trades and fulsome trades for the voluntary trade was a major move on McNaughton’s part,” said Dillon.

Dillon said it’s also not yet clear what the makeup of STO’s board of directors will be. He said with construction trades providing much of the funding for the agency, there should be union representation on the board.

Schmidt of the OGCA suggested employer representation on the board would be appropriate. But COCA’s Cunningham said he understood it would not be a representative board, as was the OCOT board, but rather a “competency-based board.”