

## **New RCCAO chair to focus on affordable housing, state of good repair projects through pandemic**

Angela Gismondi October 19, 2020



**Peter Smith, the new chair of the Residential and Civil Construction Alliance of Ontario (RCCAO),** says he wants the alliance to be the go-to resource for the industry, especially through the coronavirus crisis.

“We want to be the group people turn to when they want to understand what is important to the industry and what is best for the industry,” said Smith, who is also executive director of the Heavy Construction Association of Toronto (HCAT). “Whether that’s health and safety, best practices, efficient use of taxpayer dollars, all of those things, we want to be group that people look to for answers.”

While research has been a big part of the alliance’s focus over the years, the priority now is to get through the COVID-19 crisis.

“Our research has been something we’ve been very proud of for the last 10 years, but in the next year or so, until this COVID thing is behind us, it’s going to take a bit of a backseat,” he noted.



Smith is a civil engineer who brings an infrastructure background to the role. Former chair Phil Rubinoff, principal at the Laurier Group, who held the position for 15 years, had a residential development background.

Smith graduated from the University of Guelph's Water Resources Engineering program and the University of Toronto with a degree in civil engineering. He started his career at Armtec in Guelph, which specializes in the design and manufacture of products from the highway construction and drainage industries. In 2003, he became president and CEO of Bermingham Foundation Solutions, a deep foundation and marine specialty contractor. He became executive director of the HCAT in 2017.

He has sat on the RCCAO board for four years.

### **Peter Smith**

“I have a fairly broad background in all types of construction,” said Smith. “I’ve sat on a number of committees and I am familiar with making presentations to the government.”

One of the things he is planning to tackle immediately is the affordable housing crisis, which was important prior to the pandemic but is even more significant now.

“When we came into this year there were several challenges,” explained Smith. “There wasn’t enough affordable housing in Toronto and people were struggling to buy their first home on the residential side.

“On the infrastructure side we had a real infrastructure deficit. The federal government and the provincial government were going crazy on building different types of transit systems,” he added. “The unfortunate thing is the larger municipalities are hamstrung. They spent all their money trying to maintain their transit system but they don’t have the riders.

“Municipalities are not allowed to go into deficit so the only way they can make the books work is to have massive cuts on all the infrastructure they had planned, so rebuilding roads and bridges, sewer upgrades all the things we need, we call them state of good repair type work.”

He recalls sitting in on a number of meetings at the beginning of the year with Metrolinx and Infrastructure Ontario.

“They told us we needed to up our game. We didn’t have enough people in both skilled trades, management, engineers to be able to do all the work they were forecasting to do in 2020. Then COVID happened, so that has really been a challenge,” said Smith.

Almost every large municipality has had major cutbacks because they needed to maintain their regular social programs, he noted.

“Unfortunately, all of those construction companies and the workers who work for them are looking for work,” Smith said. “People had work, they started the year with some backlog but they have struggled because there have been fewer and fewer tenders. And a tender, for example, that might have attracted three bidders is now getting 20 bidders because people really want to get some work for next year. The problem is the federal and provincial government, they only have so much money and everybody has their hand.”

RCCAO is hoping the government invests in infrastructure to stimulate the economy sooner than later.

“Certainly the transit systems are good, but we can’t forget that affordable housing is still a priority, the homeless shelters are important and all of the ongoing regular maintenance, the roads and bridges. We have to do that because every winter there are watermain breaks, there is crumbling infrastructure,” explained Smith. “We are hoping in the mid-term that the government will step up. Construction is one of the best venues for new Canadians and young people to get into a career where there is good money and there are no barriers to entry.”