The Government Is Listening

By Don Procter

It seems the Ontario provincial government is starting to hear the building trade industry’s cries for financial help in the development and expansion of apprenticeship training facilities. Following on the heels of the $3.8 million (all numbers quoted in Canadian dollars) expansion of the Interior Systems Contractors Associations training center in Toronto last year, the province recently awarded bucks to two other building trade associations for upgrading training facilities. They are the Carpenters Training Centre for the Carpenters & Allied Workers Lot. 27 hall and the Ontario Industrial Finishing Skills Centre. The latter provides training for painter and glazier/metal mechanic trades.

While neither centre offers training in drywall or EIFS trades, the folks at ISCA have reason to be pleased with the expansion of their counterparts’ facilities. Carpenters, for example, are one of the first trades on the job site and one of the last to leave. If booming markets result in a shortage of skilled carpenters, building schedules will be delayed or postponed indefinitely. That is a scenario that no one in the industry wants to hear.

The 30,000 square foot expansion of the Carpenters Training Centre will enable the organization to train and retrain about 1,270 students in such areas as framing, renovation/retrofit, interior finishing, exterior work such as roofing and windows, concrete form work, scaffolding and site preparation. Of the $7.8 million required to build the project, $1.8 million will come from the province’s Strategic Skills Investment Program. Plans call for work to begin within a year.

Eddie Thornton, executive director, of the Carpenters local, says the expansion is vital because the center simply can’t train enough carpenters to keep up with the demand in Canada’s fastest growing metropolitan area. “With a lot of recent changes in technology,” says Thornton, “we’ll require new equipment so we can train 300 to 400 people (carpenters) annually.”

Thornton calls the province’s initiative a “remarkable move. I’m very happy that they are finally starting to give consideration to construction trade centers jointly funded by labor and management.” Up until now, he says the province ignored building industry training centers in favor of community and technical colleges with high technology programs.

The province also awarded $1.478 million to the Ontario Industrial & Finishing Skills Centre. The money will go toward a $5.2 million training expansion that will see training capacity increase from 160 apprentices annually to 500, and provide upgrading courses for 600 students yearly.

John Maceroni, the center’s training director, is also pleased that key people in the province’s ministry of economic development and trades are finally starting to recognize the training and upgrading needs of the building industry. The industry is becoming more sophisticated, and many trades require special skills to deal with new building technology. “A lot of them (government officials) didn’t understand that in the past,” Maceroni says.

He says the center’s goal is to replace every person retiring with an apprentice. That’s a vital move as the average age of painter tradespeople is approaching 50.

The major players in the building trades, including ISCA’s Hugh Laird, know the expansion moves are just a start to addressing skilled trades shortages which Toronto has begun to see. Thornton says he is lobbying the federal government to kick in money for the oft-overlooked pre-apprenticeship training that steers youth in the direction of careers in the building trades. Says Laird, “There are plenty of underemployed people working in fast food joints that have a very good education but can’t find funding for pre-apprenticeship training that would allow them out on a construction site. It’s not enough to receive funding to build a facility like this. We need continuous federal government support in program dollars to maintain it.”

About the Author
Don Procter is a free-lance writer in Ontario, Canada.