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RIBA president's message: Contractor licensing

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The issue of contractor licensing remains in the limelight both in the media and with our state legislators. Abuses by less-than-honest contractors continue to come to light, consumers continue to share their horror stories, and state regulators continue to talk about the need for better monitoring and expanded programs.

The name of the Contractors' Registration Board has even been changed to the Contractors' Registration and Licensing Board (CRLB).

The Rhode Island Builders Association (RIBA) certainly agrees with the need to rein in the problem; it's a critical consumer protection issue that reaches to the heart of our own goal to improve the images of our industry and our members.

RIBA offers conditional support for contractor licensing, but we don't want people to think that those conditions have anything to do with making it easier for outlaw contractors. Our conditions have to do with not making it easier for politicians.

For years, the General Assembly has legally strengthened the CRLB while seldom providing the means for the agency to use that strength. While CRLB executive director George Whalen and his staff, often stretched thin, have carried on with dedication, they have not been given the personnel or the money to carry out the programs they already have responsibility for, never mind take on new ones.

If we're going to have licensing and the accompanying education, monitoring and enforcement programs for all contractors, let the CRLB have the resources it needs!

One step forward was set to take place on July 1st when, in accord with legislation passed last year, CRLB was to have its own "restricted receipt account." This will allow the agency to keep the fees and fines it brings in, rather than having the money swept up by the state's General Fund, as it has been for years.

As of press time, however, Whalen said that no action had been taken by state authorities to establish such an account. "They said they'd get back to us," Whalen told The Rhode Island Builder Report.

Even if and when the account is established, it's far from the whole answer to CRLB's budget needs. And there are "people" needs as well. With the 2007 legislation, CRLB was given the extra investigator it had asked for, but had another staffer taken away at the same time.

CRLB enhances consumer safety in Rhode Island; it's not a drain on the state. Let the agency have the money and people it needs to carry on proper monitoring and enforcement.

It seems that lawmakers want to maintain the status quo. At this point, politicians can tell their constituents, "Hey, we gave them the authority to solve this, but they didn't do it. It's not my fault!"

Enough of this. We realize the state is broke, but if lawmakers want to fix the illegal-contractor problem, then let them fix the problem in a way that matters. Give CRLB what it needs to fulfill the

responsibilities it has already. Then think about new licensing programs.

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