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Local engineer honoured by university, peers

by *Chris Daponte*

EDEN MILLS -

Richard Lay says if homeowners, businesses and communities do not make changes now, they will be “in trouble” when it comes to future energy costs.

“We can’t afford to keep on living in these buildings over the next century,” said Lay, as he looked out over the village’s mill pond along the Eramosa River.

An engineer who specializes in improving the energy efficiency of buildings, Lay noted that many Eden Mills residents have installed solar panels and reduced energy consumption to save money, help the environment and contribute to the goal of one day making Eden Mills the first carbon neutral village in Canada.

Lay, who has called the village home for about 30 years, was recognized with two prestigious honours recently for his personal and professional efforts in the field of environmental engineering.

On Oct. 22, at a gala dinner at the University of Guelph, Lay received the Engineering Medal of Achievement for 2011, the highest honour awarded by the school.

The medal recognizes alumni whose contributions to the community, engineering, education, business and industry have brought honour to their alma mater and fellow alumni. The award recognizes lifetime achievement or sustained commitment to excellence.

“This was a big deal,” said Lay, who graduated from the university with an engineering degree in 1977.

“You do these things because you like to do them and they’re rewarding themselves, but it’s great to get the recognition.”

Lay, who previously studied biology at Yale University in the U.S. and also had a brief stint in welding at George Brown College in Toronto, said it was great to see former peers and professors at the University of Guelph ceremony.

Like many U of G graduates, including many current Wellington County residents, Lay feels a strong connection to the university to this day, and thus remains involved with his alma mater.

“It really helps the vitality of the community,” he said.

He explained his interest in the energy field began in the 1970s and ’80s, when experts first realized humans can not forever rely on petroleum and other non-renewable resources.

“Even if it’s available, the earth is not accepting the consequences very well,” said Lay, who after graduating from Guelph obtained his masters degree in mechanical engineering at the University of Waterloo.

He also worked in Asia as a consulting engineer for Proctor and Gamble and earlier spent one year in Africa drilling wells and working with Togo officials on rural economic development.

At another gala dinner on Nov. 1 in Ottawa, Lay joined fellow engineer Tim Dietrich to accept the Tree for Life Award from the Canadian Consulting Engineering Awards on behalf of Enermodal Engineering, where Lay has worked since 1997.

“I was delighted,” Lay said of his reaction to the announcement, though he modestly points out he was but one member of a larger building committee.

“It’s a way to spread the word and good exposure for what you’ve worked so hard on.”

The awards are Canada’s highest recognition for projects by Canadian consulting engineering firms. They are held jointly by the Association of Consulting Engineering Companies-Canada (ACEC) and Canadian Consulting Engineer magazine.

The Tree of Life Award presented to Lay and Dietrich recognized their leading role in environmental stewardship as demonstrated in the mechanical-electrical design of the new Kitchener headquarters for Enermodal Engineering.

The new building on the Grand River was completed in 2009 and is the most energy-efficient office building in Canada. It uses only 69 kilowatt-hours per square meter per year, compared with the Canadian average of 380 kWh.

“But there was no sacrifice in comfort and the indoor environment,” Lay said, noting the building is bright, warm and well ventilated.

Actual measurements since its completion indicate it is using 82% less energy and 89% less water than a conventional building. The building has received triple LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) platinum certification from the Canada Green Building Council, a first in Canada.

Eden Mills architect Charles Simon has known Lay for over 40 years and says it’s nice to see Lay getting the recognition.

“He’s both an outstanding person and an outstanding engineer,” said Simon. “He’s one of the top guys in his field.”

In addition to Lay’s professional achievements, Simon said Lay has done “an enormous amount of work” in his community.

“He’s done wonderful things outside engineering,” said Simon, noting Lay has been a key part of ongoing plans to upgrade and improve the energy efficiency of the Eden Mills community hall.

Lay noted over a decade of thought and planning have gone into the proposed upgrades at the hall, and he doesn’t agree with those village residents who feel erecting solar panels beside the hall will somehow affect the heritage qualities of the village.

“The future is not going to look like the past - we’ve got to accept that,” Lay said before reiterating a mantra that has likely inspired most of his life’s work.

“The do-nothing scenario is not an option.”

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