

P. Aarne Vesilind's Commentary on "Crashing into Law"

Commentary On
Crashing into Law

When I was a kid, I used to make balsa wood model airplanes. They looked real, and some of them even flew, powered by rubber bands.

When I became an engineer, I made other kinds of models -- mathematical and conceptual models -- of environmental engineering problems. And some of these models "flew": (They were accepted by the profession as useful for solving real problems).

The two types of models are similar in that they are toys that I like to make. In both cases, the models try to represent reality, and I have fun when they give results that match real world data.

These models take on ethical overtones if they are to be used by others and if their use can result in some benefit or harm. If I had suggested that my balsa wood airplanes could fly more than a few feet, I would have raised expectations in someone who might have been willing to pay me for these airplanes and thus would have invested wealth based on my assurance that the planes would perform as I claimed. Obviously, I would have been lying.

Similarly, for Oleson to say that his model will simulate the crash is raising undue expectations in the person who is about to use the model for a serious purpose -- a lawsuit. The Svenson/Oleson model is a toy. Their experience has shown that it did not correctly simulate the crash. That should be the end of it. Oleson's behavior is unethical and unprofessional, and it is a shame that he, a mentor, is presenting such a dishonorable example to Svenson.

I might suggest a simple test to determine whether Oleson is acting honorably. Take away the money. Assume that he is not getting paid. Would he still be willing to compromise his professional reputation in such a way? If not, then he has sold his professional integrity.