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Construction

Ontario's residential builders back One Ontario initiative to streamline permitting system

The Residential Construction Council of Ontario applauds a new One Ontario initiative to develop guidelines for a digital platform that could be used by all municipalities across the province for the development approval and permitting processes.

“Development of a streamlined and uniform e-permitting system to be used by planning and building departments in all municipalities across the province would result in faster building approvals and a more efficient system that would increase the supply of housing across the province,” says RESCON president Richard Lyall (photo). “A common digital system that is harmonized would also allow external agencies to be linked with approval agencies, thereby improving the workflow.”

The initiative is being launched by AECO Innovation Lab, a consortium that is driving digital transformation across the architecture, engineering and construction sectors. The initiative would set the stage for a comprehensive e-permitting system that would replace the current patchwork of systems and streamline the process across municipalities by developing new guidelines that will establish a set of provincial data exchange standards.

“By developing a unified standard, all municipalities will be singing off the same song sheet when it comes to issuing approvals,” explains Lyall, who is on AECO's board of advisors. “This will be good for other sectors of construction, especially infrastructure. It will enable designers, permit applicants, builders, plans examiners, building department officials and approval agencies within municipalities and externally to be connected through a transparent electronic platform.”

The supply of new homes being built across Ontario and the GTA is clearly not enough to meet the demand. A research report done by RESCON indicated a big reason is that the housing supply chain in the GTA is mired in red tape. The report recommended that Ontario's 444 municipalities move out of the world of pen and paper and adopt an inter-connected, state-of-the-art digital e-permitting platform.

The province needs to build 75,000 new homes per year over the next 24 years to keep up with expected population growth but is short 12,000 units per year on average. Research has shown that rezoning delays can take up to three years and residential site plan approvals can take an additional two years in the permitting process, adding tens of thousands of dollars to housing prices.

All municipalities must conform to existing provincial regulations which govern development and building, namely the Planning Act and the Building Code Act, so it makes sense to modernize and standardize the approval process across Ontario municipalities. Now is also the perfect time to undertake digitization efforts as COVID has impacted face-to-face interactions and resulted in work being done electronically or remotely.

“The One Ontario initiative is a ground-breaking program that will drive the digital building permit process and lead to a streamlined, transparent approval system,” says Lyall. “It will provide a long-overdue boost to the productivity of our industry and benefit municipalities, builders and the public.”