



RESCON: Look west for true innovation in tall wood homes

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Alberta, a province better known for its oil industry than its forestry sector will permit wood towers up to 12 storeys, doubling the previous building code height limit.

I couldn't help but think of this 1972 ditty by the Canadian icon when I heard the recent news that a province better known for its oil industry than its forestry sector will permit wood towers up to 12 storeys, doubling the previous building code height limit.

Here, we're still stuck on six in The Six (and the rest of Ontario). This despite the fact that MPP Vic Fedeli tabled Bill 19 in March 2018 that would allow mass-timber buildings up to 14 storeys. It's still under consideration.

Back to Alberta: this prairie province has made this very shrewd move ahead of the National Building Code, which will likely adopt a similar change within the next year.

The reasons it cited to make the move now included supporting the forestry industry, improving housing affordability, boosting employment and helping the development industry.

Most importantly ...“We made this change knowing that mass-timber products are safe and that these buildings will meet all necessary standards,” Alberta Municipal Affairs Minister Kaycee Madu said in a press release.

Mass-timber buildings are also quieter and quicker to construct. And let’s not forget the environmental benefits of building with wood, which sequesters carbon. Take, for example, the University of British Columbia’s Brock Commons, an 18-storey student residence tower in Vancouver completed in 2017.

The mass-timber structure for the Commons sequestered about 1,750 tonnes of carbon in its timber and prevented almost 680 tonnes of emissions from the construction process in comparison to using other building materials. That’s like taking more than 500 cars off the road for an entire year.

It has taken a few years for Ontario builder/developers to plan and build six-storey light wood-frame buildings, and once again, the country’s economic engine (so we tell ourselves) can’t keep up with other Canadian jurisdictions when it comes to engineered mass timber.

For a little perspective, RESCON teamed up with several key stakeholders, including our friends at BILD, to help bring in six-storey wood in 2015, raising the limit from four.

At the time, it was such a big step in our industry’s evolution that RESCON was recognized as a champion of wood buildings production by both the Wood WORKS! wood awards and the Ontario Forestry Industries Association.

These accolades were an honour, but they seem like a lifetime ago. There are many mass-timber projects in Canada and Europe going higher than six.

- In Vienna, there’s the 24-storey HoHo project.
- Vancouver is building the 19-storey Terrace House.
- In Brumunddal, Norway, an 18-storey building called Mjøstårnet was finished last year.
- The University of Toronto is planning to build a 14-storey tower. Cart before horse without the regulations in place? I call it ambition (it’s being done under the more onerous alternative solutions approval process; that’s for another column).
- George Brown College has a 12-storey tower in the works for its waterfront campus (same story as U of T).
- Quebec City has a 13-storey residential condo building called Origine.
- In Montreal, there’s Arbora, a condo community of three eight-storey towers.

And there are a lot more. I’ve heard of several mass-timber projects around the world planned for 30-plus storeys (including Sidewalk Labs’ recent 35-storey proposal for Toronto). But let’s not go there today.

Right now, the focus for Ontario is to go from six to 14. Let’s get this done.

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