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Ontario wood frame building gets a push

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Members of the building and development industry are calling for changes in the Ontario Building Code (OBC) which would allow the construction of wood frame buildings of up to six storeys, increasing the limit from the current four storeys.

An expert in urban planning says the move would drive construction costs down and allow for more affordable options for prospective homebuyers.

According to a report called *Unlocking the Potential For Mid-Rise Buildings*, prepared by urban and regional planning professor Paul Bedford, wood frame buildings of up to six storeys are less expensive to build than poured concrete structures, and would boost the mid-rise housing market that is overshadowed by highrise and low-rise buildings.

“We need a variety of choices for people to live,” said Bryan Tuckey, president and CEO of the Building Industry and Land Development Association (BILD).

“The GTA is going to welcome in around 100,000 people every year for the next 30 years.”

Tuckey, joined by other industry members and city planners, announced the amendments to the OBC last week in downtown Toronto.

The report states that wood frame construction could cost up to 10 to 15 per cent less than concrete construction. And based on a 1,000-square-foot unit, cost savings of \$20,000 to \$25,000 could be achieved.

Cost saving figures will vary depending on parking arrangements, exterior wall treatment, fireproofing and any required earthquake resistant features.

Though supporters of wood frame construction claim it brings economic benefits, there are safety fire safety concerns that still linger, but supporters of the change are quick argue that wood is safe.

“The number of fire incidents does not increase just because buildings have more combustible material,” said Richard Lyall, president of RESCON in a statement.

“Our study found that data collected by the National Fire Incident Reporting System, doesn’t show that fire incidents are related to the type of construction, rather to the use and occupancy of the building.”

“Wood frame buildings have to meet the same standards as those built using other materials,” said executive director of Ontario wood Works and the Canadian Wood Council, Marianne Berube.

Tuckey says safety is still a key priority and he believes that further consultations will create a better understanding of the impact of wood frame construction.

“We’ve met with fire people and safety is a key concern, both for the fire fighter and the occupants of the units.”

To tackle some of the fire safety concerns, a list of building recommendations were made through a report prepared by Randal Brown & Associates Engineering Ltd.

The recommendations include providing access to construction sites for fire department vehicles, limiting the use of combustible exterior cladding on the fifth and sixth storeys, installing sprinklers on exterior balconies and providing a water supply to a building for fire services.

Bryan Tuckey, president and CEO of the Building Industry and Land Development association says Ontario’s building stock needs a variety of choices for people to choose from.

The Cement Association of Canada (CAC) are opposing the recommended OBC changes, expressing that cost savings are being put ahead of safety.

“The code system was put in place to ensure the safety of our citizens, especially the most vulnerable ones, and should not be circumvented by any industry sector, especially if it could put the safety of Ontario residents at risk,” stated CAC president and CEO Michael Sweeney in a press a release.

The province of British Columbia adopted changes to the British Columbia Building Code (BCBC) in 2009 that allowed wood frame construction up to six storeys.

Bedford’s report says it had an “immediate positive impact” on its local economy which included job creation, more affordable housing, increased taxation and minimizing the carbon footprint of building construction.

Tuckey says that the next step is to have the provincial government hold a consultation on the Ontario Building Code and the National Building Code which is up for review this summer. He hopes to see a change in the OBC within 12 to 18 months.