

RESCON asks province to update building and planning processes

Grant Cameron February 11, 2020



Ontario's building and planning development approvals process is out of date and needs to be improved, the **Residential Construction Council of Ontario (RESCON)** states in its 2020 pre-budget submission.

“Currently, our process is antiquated, and we are not abreast of other jurisdictions doing things much more efficiently,” **Richard Lyall, president of RESCON**, wrote in a letter accompanying the six-page submission that was sent to Amarjot Sandhu, chair of the standing committee on finance and economic affairs.

Changes by government, especially around passage of the More Homes, More Choice Act, has put us on the right path, he said, but there is still room for improvement, particularly around overreach policies by municipalities that are interfering with projects and impacting the development approvals process.

“The government's work on improving the development approvals process is commendable, however Ontario is not keeping pace with the pace of change and further structural and

regulatory changes are necessary to support growth,” states Lyall, who for years now has been urging governments to adopt reforms.

For example, he notes, Canada, which is represented by Toronto, is ranked 64th globally by the World Bank when it comes to dealing with construction permits while the United States, represented by New York City and Los Angeles, ranks 24th.

“The province has an opportunity to be at the forefront of technological and innovative changes but must act decisively to embrace these opportunities,” he wrote.

Lyall states that government’s mandate of creating jobs and investment opportunities is contingent upon being able to support infrastructure and housing.

“The big thing in allowing this to occur is a streamlined building and planning development approvals process,” he writes.

According to the brief, Ontario’s development and building approvals processes are much slower and less innovation-focused than many other advanced jurisdictions. Research done by RESCON shows that site-plan control approvals that should take just one month often take more than nine months, with follow-up research indicating that this timeline is now more than two years for residential buildings.

RESCON argues that the provincial government needs to engage in a much more “robust and granular” way with municipalities as well as dedicate resources for innovation and policy changes, and there needs to be a greatly expanded use of e-permitting in the planning, engineering and building permitting areas.

The council suggests an e-permitting system be set up that would allow agencies within a municipality as well as external agencies to be linked together on a common platform and enable builders to communicate with regulatory agencies and informally test development ideas prior to making a submission.

A technical reference group has been set up to explore implementing a system, but RESCON wants the province to take more decisive action in collaboration with industry and municipalities to make it happen.

RESCON is also requesting that Ontario act to stop municipalities putting in place policies and guidelines that directly contradict provincial policies and end up creating red tape and slowing down projects.

The council notes that municipalities like the City of Waterloo and Toronto have put in place their own guidelines and standards, although only the province has the authority to make regulations governing standards for the construction and demolition of buildings, which it does through the Building Code Act.

The RESCON brief addresses a couple of other key issues, one being that the province should change the Ontario Building Code as expeditiously as possible and mirror changes to the model National Building Code that will be coming out in 2020 to allow construction of mass-timber buildings of 12 or more storeys.

Other jurisdictions in Canada and around the world have already changed building code provisions to allow construction of tall, mass-timber buildings, but the Ontario Building Code limits building height for any type of wood buildings to six storeys.

“We should fast track these changes given abundant Canadian and international experience in constructing high-rise timber buildings, such as an 18-storey mass timber building in Vancouver and similar projects in Quebec,” the brief states.

The brief outlines several benefits associated with fast-tracking tall, mass-timber code adoption and notes that Ontario needs to catch up and increase choice and competition in the building sector.

RESCON also weighed in on the skilled trade shortage, noting that the province has made great strides, but construction has a marketing problem and young people and those that influence them will only consider the skilled trades if they are educated with fulsome, catchy information about the industry.

“To that end, the provincial education system needs to be overhauled and a quantitative, analytical deep dive needs to be performed on value-for-money relative to skilled training given the shortages that persist in our industry,” the brief states.

“Currently only four per cent of apprentices are women. An improved system is needed to ensure an equitable and transparent trades admission process which resembles the college or university admissions system.”

RESCON recommends that the province improve incentives for employers to hire young people and apprentices and create a skilled trades standardized application process for everyone across Ontario.