

Building codes must harmonize on wood: RESCON

Grant Cameron February 25, 2020



Ontario should immediately take steps to harmonize the province’s building code with the national system so that wood can be used in more mid-rise and taller residential buildings.

That’s the opinion laid out in a letter sent recently by **Richard Lyall, president of the Residential Construction Council of Ontario (RESCON)**, to staff at the provincial Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry.

“RESCON believes that harmonizing the Ontario Building Code with the National Building Code (NBC) should be an urgent priority as Ontario is already well behind many other jurisdictions,” he wrote in the three-page letter.

“To ensure the successful and prompt harmonization of the Ontario Building code with the National Building Code it is imperative that government and industry work together.”

The next edition of the NBC, expected to be published at the end of the year, will allow the use of tall wood construction with fire-resistant material for up to 12 storeys.

The letter summed up the organization’s thoughts on the government’s draft Ontario Forest Sector Strategy called A Blueprint for Success. The province has been consulting with

Indigenous, municipal and industry leaders to come up with a plan that will, among other things, expand the market for Ontario's wood products.

Seven roundtable sessions were held across the province and the plan has been floated to the public for comment.

RESCON, which represents more than 200 residential builders in the province, has argued for a harmonized strategy, and believes the current code in Ontario, which limits the height of wood buildings to six storeys, is outdated as other provinces and jurisdictions have moved to allow much taller wood buildings.

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— **Richard Lyall**

Residential Construction Council of Ontario

The draft Forest Sector Strategy notes that the province is working, through efforts such as its Housing Supply Action Plan, to harmonize the Ontario Building Code with national codes, as it may expand opportunities to use mass timber in Ontario buildings, open new markets for manufacturers and provide stimulus to the broader forest sector.

The strategy also notes that the province has supported four tall-wood demonstration projects: a 12-storey Arbour development by George Brown College; a 14-storey Academic Tower at the University of Toronto; a 12-storey residential condominium building in North Bay; and an eight-storey office building in Toronto.

“RESCON commends the province for supporting these projects,” Lyall states. “However, Ontario's building regulatory environment still lags well behind that of other Canadian and international jurisdictions. To that end, more needs to be done to update the Ontario Building Code as well as related code compliance and enforcement systems.”

Lyall notes that RESCON “strongly supports” the use of more wood in taller residential buildings and believes Ontario should allow for all construction types that meet the very high safety and energy efficiency requirements in the code.

“Introducing the option of using more wood will provide industry-wide benefits as it will increase competition resulting from more choice and more options,” Lyall states.

“Should a builder switch from steel or concrete to a wood-structured system for certain types of taller buildings, the (Ontario) Building Code should be aligned with international best practice and should not be an obstacle to safe, energy-efficient construction.”

While Ontario has strict limits on wood construction heights, British Columbia allows local municipalities to permit 12-storey mass timber buildings. Alberta recently became the first

province in Canada to allow wood-building construction for up to 12 storeys. The U.S. state of Oregon and many European countries also allow for taller mass timber buildings.

Lyll says in his letter that, currently in Ontario, builders who want to construct taller mass timber buildings must rely on the more difficult and uncertain “alternative solutions” option to obtaining a building permit which is much more onerous on the applicant and designers.

“We believe that improved engagement with Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing’s divisions responsible for the management of the Ontario Building Code is necessary and essential to the success of Ontario’s Code harmonization efforts. Along with industry partners, RESCON will continue working with the Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry as well as other relevant ministries on moving forward quickly on harmonization.”

RESCON also strongly supports the idea of increasing the use of modular and prefabricated building components such as open and closed building panels in residential building projects,

“Accordingly, RESCON recommends that increasing adoption of modular and panelized building, including those that use advanced engineered wood products, be put on a faster track and move from a future action to an immediate action item,” Lyll states in his letter. “This is a priority for RESCON and industry and an issue on which we will be working closely with government in the near term.”

He notes that increasing the use of closed panels and modules also requires a modernized building regulatory regime with updated standards because such construction relies heavily on factory-assembled and building-code compliant components.

“Certification of the factory by an accredited certification body and labeling of the prefabricated components means that the local building inspectors can rely on the factory certification to comply with the relevant building code requirements.”

As such, he states, it is important that the latest standards dealing with prefabricated panels and modules also be referenced in the building code.