

CAC and RESCON resume wood frame debate

RICHARD GILBERT *Sep 3, 2014*

The residential construction industry is refuting claims by the Cement Association of Canada (CAC) that a proposal to modify the building code and allow taller wood frame structures will create a public safety hazard.

"I don't think there is any doubt in anyone's mind, other than the cement industry, that we expect an announcement at any time," said Richard Lyall, president of the Residential Construction Council of Ontario (RESCON).

"The problem with the cement industry's criticism is it is obvious why they don't like it, but their technical stuff is baseless. They rely on fear mongering, which is back firing on them. This is a meritless attack on timber frame buildings, in this jurisdiction, when it's being done just about everywhere else in the world."

The Ontario government announced in March 2014 that it is moving forward with proposed changes to the Ontario Building Code (OBC), which would allow the construction of six storey wood frame buildings.

Currently, the OBC limits wood-frame construction to four storeys. The public consultation period for the proposal ended on May 4.

Both RESCON and CAC are waiting for the Ontario government to make a final decision about the proposal, which is currently pending. In a recent statement the CAC directed comments to Ontario's political leaders that the proposed changes will put Canadians' safety at risk.

"Building practices that may compromise safety are not more affordable — they are cheap," said Michael McSweeney, president and CEO, Cement Association of Canada (CAC) in a press release.

"Taller wood-frame buildings could compromise the safety of the people who might live and work in them, as well as the safety of front line responders like firefighters. Rising emergency services costs are already straining municipal budgets. We cannot afford to take this risk."



According to the CAC, the proposed change would require that only 10 per cent of the perimeter of a five or six storey wood-frame building be within 15 meters of a street that provides fire service access.

As a result, a developer could build a structure that is 19 meters wide facing one street and 77 meters deep, with no requirement for fire access on the sides and back of the building.

This is being done to accommodate the structure of Toronto lots and could be particularly dangerous in the case of infill housing, as most of the gas and other mechanical connections tend to be located at the side or rear of the building where they would be inaccessible to firefighting personnel, argues CAC.

The proposed regulation is less stringent than the National Building Code of Canada (NBCC), which will require that 25 per cent of the perimeter of a five or six-storey wood-frame building be within 15 meters of a street.

The CAC argues that any deviation from the NBCC will make it more difficult for municipal fire services to fight fires.

This is especially important in urban settings, where these new larger combustible buildings could pose a greater risk to older adjacent buildings that were not designed for this new level of fire risk.

In response, Lyall argues the proposed changes to the OBC will result in the construction of safe, affordable homes for residents across the Greater Toronto Area (GTA).

In support of this proposal, the Building Industry and Land Development Association (BILD) and RESCON released a report in May 2013 that argued changes to the OBC would unlock the potential of a new mid-rise market throughout the GTA.

The report entitled *Unlocking the Potential for Mid-Rise Buildings: Six Storey Wood Structures* was written by former City of Toronto Chief Planner Paul Bedford. He concluded that the construction of six-storey wood buildings would increase the variety of living choice, realize cost savings for construction of the home and increase intensification.

In opposition, the CEC argues the proposed changes to the OBC will put greater pressure on municipal budgets by requiring more firefighting resources be allocated to address taller wood-frame structures.

For example, some municipalities will need to purchase new ladder trucks that cost about \$1 million each and increase the required number of specially trained firefighting personnel in order to protect the public.

The proposal as currently drafted does not include any reference to municipal firefighting capacity and the response time of emergency personnel.