

Breaking ground

Injecting new life into old neighbourhoods

Proposed Ontario building code changes would allow taller wood-frame buildings along transit corridors

Six-storey wood-frame construction could be one of the answers to Ontario's intensification goals.

We need only look to British Columbia for supporting evidence. Charan Sethi was the first developer in that province to build a six-storey wood-frame condo project after a building code change in 2009 allowed for wood-frame residential buildings of up to six floors.

The Surrey, B.C.-based builder is a fan of wood-frame condos because they can be built faster than similar-sized concrete or steel structures. What's more, wood — a renewable resource B.C. has in utter abundance — is cheaper than concrete. "Wood construction offers a definite advantage," says Sethi, president of Tien Sher Homes.

B.C.'s experience could be instructive for Ontario, which in March announced it is moving ahead with proposed changes to this province's building code to allow the use of wood-frame construction in buildings of up to six storeys (currently only wood-framed homes up to four storeys are allowed).

The province is in the midst of a regulatory review of the proposal.

Another option

"This first step is great news for our industry and new-home buyers," says Bryan Tuckey, president and CEO of the Building Industry and Land Development Association (BILD). "At a time when the GTA market is dominated by either high-rise or low-rise buildings, it adds another option to the market."

BILD has long been advocating for more options to enable families to live in established neighbourhoods.

Allowing six-storey woodframe construction will encourage more new mid-rise projects in existing urban areas and along transit corridors, in accordance with the intensification goals set out in the province's Places to Grow plan. This is a more sustainable approach to urban development, allowing a greater number of people to live in close proximity to where they work and play, and enabling them to use transit to get around versus hopping in their cars.

And a greater number of taller mid-rise buildings means that more purchasers and renters will have opportunities to enjoy great



Tien Sher's Quattro3 was the first six-storey wood-frame condo project built in British Columbia. The building went from having four floors and 116 units to having six floors with 165 units.

neighbourhoods, injecting new vibrancy and life into those areas and giving a big boost to local businesses. Wood-frame condos may well be the secret to revitalizing avenues and streets across the GTA.

Greater flexibility

Wood-frame construction offers other advantages.

It is environmentally friendly, making use of mostly renewable and recyclable materials. Wood also gives builders and architects greater flexibility, creating possibilities for intricate designs through the use of engineered lumber.

Most important for purchasers, construction using wood is faster and more efficient than with concrete, which means buyers can move into their new homes sooner, and they pay less for those homes as a result. "There's a definite speed advantage with wood over concrete," says Sethi.

"Wood-frame construction is getting increasingly higher quality — especially as we're starting to use more engineered wood products, such as laminated beams, engineered joists, and so on," notes Michael Geller, an architect who was involved in the province's consultations on building code changes. "So much so that we're starting to read about not just six storeys, but even taller buildings being constructed out of wood."

We're talking about doing 10-storey wood-frame buildings in B.C. — it's still experimental, but it's a reflection of the fact that the material is getting better, the shrinkage problems from the past have now been addressed, and the result is a very satisfactory product."

The B.C. building code changes appear to have triggered a wave of wood-frame condo construction, with more than 100 projects built or under development since 2009. "There were a number of other projects out there waiting for (the changes to) happen," says Sethi.

Enhancing innovation

It wasn't always this way. When B.C. first proposed increasing the height limit for wood-frame residential construction, the local building industry had misgivings.

"There was concern related to shrinkage (of wood in taller structures) and the potential for fires, especially during construction," says Geller. "So there was a slow take-up on the idea."

The concerns have proven to be unfounded. Innovations in engineered lumber in recent years have made the materials less susceptible to shrinkage, Geller points out.

“There is a significant cost difference between wood and concrete to justify going to six-storey wood-frame construction.”

Michael Geller
ARCHITECT



JENNIFER GAUTHIER

And when it comes to fire safety, wood structures are protected through the use of fire resistant materials and are equipped with sophisticated sprinkler systems. "These buildings have to meet the same fire and safety requirements as any other buildings," says Sethi.

Five years after B.C. changed its building code to permit six-storey wood-frame construction, Geller notes that more and more condo developers there are embracing the idea.

Good news for buyers

Many would attest the savings alone can be a compelling argument in its favour. "Especially in

places like Toronto and Vancouver, where price and affordability is a major consideration," Sethi says.

When it comes to six-storey wood-frame buildings, there's good news for purchasers here.

Taller buildings allow developers to stack more units on the same piece of expensive land. In the case of Quattro3, B.C.'s building code changes meant the building was able to go from having four floors and 116 units to six floors with 165 units.

"Adding two floors adds more units, and the cost per unit comes down," says Sethi.

"It can be a more economical way to produce housing."



JENNIFER GAUTHIER

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Charan Sethi
PRESIDENT,
TIEN SHER HOMES

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WORKING **TOGETHER** TOWARD A GREATER GTA

Building healthy, complete communities is a team effort. That's why BILD works closely with our partners in government to establish fair and effective policies that affect the land development, home building and professional renovation industry in the GTA. We are always at the table on behalf of the industry and new home buyers.

So why is advocating on your behalf so vital to us?



BECAUSE THE GTA IS OUR HOME TOO

