



Builders strongly back Victoria's plan to raise the maximum height of wood-frame apartments

Aim is to encourage more use of timber by allowing buildings up to six storeys

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A plan by the province to raise the maximum height for wood-framed apartment buildings to encourage more use of the province's timber is receiving strong support from builders.

Premier Gordon Campbell told mayors attending a Whistler convention last week that he wants to support the province's forest industry by allowing the construction of wood-framed condominiums higher than the current four-storey limit.

And Housing Minister Rich Coleman told the Canadian Home Builders' Association two weeks ago that he wants to see wood-framed building up to six storeys high.

"We want to be responsive to market changes," he said April 30. "One of the initiatives is we want to build a higher building out of wood. We want to go to six storeys."

Coleman said the necessary building code changes could be accomplished through regulatory change and could be in place by September.

B.C. is already pushing the limit under the National Building Code by going as high as four storeys in wood, said architect Richard Kadulski, but going higher, is doable, he said.

"The construction industry here is very comfortable with wood," he said.

However, higher condominiums could bump up against municipal zoning regulations that govern building heights, he said.

Neil Chrystal, president of Polygon Homes, said if the limit were raised, Polygon would go for more height in wood. It could lead to new, more varied building designs, he said. Polygon builds with both concrete and wood.

"It could lead to increased densities where it makes sense and typically wood-framed buildings are somewhat more affordable to build, so you are addressing the affordability issue also. It's a double win," he said.

Wood-framed construction has been limited to three storeys under the National Building Code -- B.C pushed it to four storeys -- for technical reasons. Specifically any shrinkage in the thickness of floor joists tends to compound with each additional storey. But new technologies, such as engineered wood, can resolve those issues, said Victoria builder Herman Rebneris of Cottage Grove Contracting.

Rebneris is an advocate of going beyond four storeys.

He said both Seattle and Portland allow five-storey wood-framed condos, going to six if the first floor is concrete.

In Europe, wood-framed condos can be up to eight storeys tall, he said.

"I think there is an opportunity here. Wood-framed buildings are cheaper and they are made from sustainable products."

Peter Simpson, chief executive officer of the Greater Vancouver Home Builders' Association, said he has travelled to Asia promoting wood-framed construction. It makes sense to promote greater use of wood in B.C. construction because it's a local resource, he said.

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