

MAY 01 2014

Ottawa, April 25, 2014

His Worship Bob Bratina  
Mayor of City of Hamilton  
71 Main St. West, 2nd Floor  
Hamilton, ON  
L8P 4Y5

Dear Mayor Bratina,

On behalf of the Cement Association of Canada (CAC), I would like to draw your attention to an urgent issue that could negatively impact the integrity of the Ontario Building Code and jeopardize the safety of the people in your municipality.

On March 20, 2014, the Ontario government announced proposed changes to the Ontario Building Code to permit the construction of six-storey wood frame buildings. The province is holding a public consultation on the proposed changes until May 4, 2014.

The provincial government's announcement reflects the interests of the wood products industry and its recent lobbying efforts. Those who promote taller wood frame construction believe that a four storey limit on residential and commercial wood buildings is no longer necessary, and have been actively pressing provincial governments to politically amend building codes to permit six storey wood frame structures outside the tried and true longstanding building code review process. Federally, the wood products industry is also pushing for changes to allow for the construction of six-storey wood buildings in the 2015 edition of the National Building Code of Canada.

As an elected representative of your municipality, I know that you want to protect and strengthen your municipality, as well as ensure that your housing market meets or exceeds the codes and standards that the residents of your community deserve. Unfortunately, the proposal put forth by the Ontario government, as currently drafted, could place Ontarians' lives at risk.

Currently, there are no provisions in place to protect those who are engaged in the construction of these buildings or the fire fighters who respond to emergencies or potentially fatal fires in these buildings. It is considered outside the mandate of the building code to include safety clauses for people who work on the site and those who respond to emergencies at the site. We believe that the lives of fire fighters should be protected in the Ontario Building Code. An interesting point to note is that Ontario has 19,000 voluntary fire fighters and only 11,000 professional fire fighters.

Further, if the regulation is approved, taller wood frame buildings may be constructed in areas of your municipality that may not have adequate firefighting coverage, including those currently being protected by voluntary firefighters. Many local fire departments across the province do not have the equipment to fight a massive blaze in a six storey building. To adequately fight such a fire, fire fighters need 100-foot ladder trucks that cost as much as \$1.0 million each and require specially trained crews. This is very costly, particularly at a time when municipal tax dollars are being stretched to the limit and when we see some Ontario municipalities, including the city of Toronto, cutting their budgets for fire services.



Owners of residential and commercial buildings constructed with wood may also face higher insurance premiums. I know that your government wants to ensure that housing remains affordable in your municipality. The proposed changes to the Ontario Building Code will undoubtedly increase building and insurance costs – and, most importantly, compromise the safety of the people in your community.

Those who are often the most vulnerable – the very young, seniors and physically disabled citizens – are those who would be at greatest risk in the unfortunate scenario where a fire breaks out. The massive fires that have recently destroyed multi-storey wood buildings in Kingston, Ontario, Richmond, British Columbia, Edmonton, Alberta, and Houston, Texas, demonstrate how dangerous these buildings can be, and how many lives will be put at risk as a result.

We do appreciate that the Ontario government has included some fire safety provisions in the draft proposal, such as the inclusion of non-combustible stairwells. However, the omission of important fire safety features – such as non-combustible elevator shafts and firewalls – demonstrate that this proposal does not go far enough to protect the people and communities of Ontario.

Recently we saw how a concrete masonry firewall prevented a raging fire in L'Isle-Verte, Quebec from destroying an entire retirement complex. This tragedy should serve as a reminder that we need more fire safety features implemented in our building codes to fully protect the safety of Ontario communities. The minimum standard of a building code is just not enough to protect the residents of your community.

The proposal that has been put forward by the Ontario government, which boosts an industry at the expense of citizens' safety, is a cause of great concern. We are currently urging each and every politician in Ontario to call on the provincial government to defer any proposed mid-rise wood frame changes to the Ontario Building Code until after the 2015 National Building Code of Canada is debated and the fire safety issues are adequately addressed. This will allow time for proper assessment and coordination with the National Building Code of Canada, which is the standard code development process traditionally used in Ontario. It is crucial that any building code changes go through proper channels and ensure that all fire safety implications are addressed. We need a full public policy debate about what risks Ontarians are willing to take when it comes to the construction standards set for the buildings that we live and work in.

Please write to your MPP and to the Honourable Bill Mauro, Minister of Municipal Affairs to raise your concern that the Province of Ontario shouldn't be moving so quickly and out of step with the National Building Code Process. Feel free to contact me directly if you have any questions about the CAC's position on mid-rise wood frame construction and fire safety. We know you understand that the health and safety of Ontario communities must come first.

Sincerely,

Michael B McSweeney  
President and CEO