

Fire Summit IV– June 19, 2012

Summary Report

August 10, 2012



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Introduction

On June 19th, 2012, members of fire rescue services from across Alberta joined representatives from Alberta's homebuilding industry to discuss how to address safety in the development and construction of buildings and homes as Alberta's changing demographics alter the kinds of housing stock demanded by the market.

For the last decade, Alberta has been a place of prosperity and opportunity, making the province a key destination to move to and stay, both from other countries and provinces. As a result, Alberta's demographic landscape is rapidly changing, and in turn, the markets that service our society. This is no truer than in the homebuilding industry. Emerging cultural and age demographics are creating a demand for housing stock with very different safety and emergency response considerations than single-family home communities.

To begin the Fire Summit, a panel that included members of the development and planning industry, the City of Edmonton and Fire Rescue Services discussed the effect of these demographic trends from their unique perspective. Their presentations provided the room with an understanding of how the building landscape of Alberta is set to change and the challenges this poses for fire and emergency services.

Alberta is a growing place, with a projected population as high as 6.5 million by 2050, this population growth is happening at a faster pace than our housing stock can accommodate, both in terms of inventory and the type of home that these customers will be demanding. The future of Alberta's housing stock is density: multi-family, mixed-use developments located close to major transit hubs and key services. More compact dwellings in denser neighborhoods present critical issues such as special separation, protecting adjacent property during construction, planning for emergency access, use of new construction materials and multi-generational dwellings.

The panel and the issues they raised reminded attendees that ensuring safety is a process that always requires attention. Participants broke out into groups for the remainder of the day and developed a set of priorities and discuss the conditions required to address them.

Background Facts

- Alberta's population is changing rapidly, both in terms of size and demographics.
- New demographics will likely demand denser housing stock like condos, townhouses, and rental units.
- Construction projects using new building materials and designs pose risks to adjacent developments.
- Current construction techniques, materials and neighborhood plans are not always adequately addressed by building code policy.

Major Identified Priorities

In their breakout groups, attendees were asked to identify their top five building fire safety issues. The priorities of the individual groups were shared, discussed by the collected summit attendees and then refined into a set of five priorities that reflected the most important issues for the attendees:

Mandatory Residential Sprinklers

Mentioned by nearly every breakout group, the inclusion of sprinklers in new housing developments was seen as a very important priority. Attendees acknowledged that this could represent some additional cost for material and enforcement, but felt it a necessary, proactive step given the demand for density and multi-family dwellings.

Considerations for Access and Egress in Building and Neighborhood Planning

The ability for rescue services to easily move through a neighborhood and access all buildings within a development is a key factor for a timely, effective response from fire rescue services. As cities and developers plan new neighborhoods, it is important that they ensure these developments reflect the need for quick access and egress for first responders in all climates and conditions.

Building Protection During Construction

Protecting from fire is not just a matter for finished developments – new building materials and processes leave construction sites and their adjacent developments vulnerable to fire. Updated code requirements and thorough testing of building materials are important to ensuring that construction sites do not act as an unnecessary hazard.

Keeping Building Codes Current with Demographic Changes

Building codes are at their most effective when they appropriately address the way the people use housing. A rapidly changing society that brings demand for new kinds of housing means that the building code must change along with it. Currently, building codes are not keeping pace with this rate of change, increasing the risk of a catastrophic event.

Consistency in Legislation, Code Enforcement and Approvals

The various policy tools we use to ensure fire and building safety in Alberta need to be applied more consistently. There cannot be different rules or levels of enforcement for different markets – the system needs to work at developing a set of consistent province-wide standards.

Addressing the Issues

With five decided-upon priorities in hand, the participants went back to their groups and discussed three questions around how they can address the priorities they had identified:

What do we need to be successful in these areas?

- Simple, common-sense steps to prevent accidents, arson and injuries: planning, training, lighting, securing sites and keeping sites clean.
- Additional fire halls.
- A specific cataloging and analysis of where legislation has fallen short.
- A streamlined code that is easy for users to understand and comply with – from the professional builder to the amateur renovator.
- Regular forums and communication channels that give fire rescue services, relevant industry partners and governments the opportunity to share information, discuss solutions and even develop collaborative partnerships.
- Consistent, up-to-date testing of new building materials and techniques.

What obstacles are standing in our way?

- A lack of consistency in the code, legislation and policies between jurisdictions, ministries and agencies erodes confidence in how it is applied across jurisdictions.
- There is some need for additional leadership from the province, cities and the fire commissioner's office.
- The code change cycle is not keeping up with advances in building material technology and significant demographic shifts.
- Code changes are viewed by some developers as cost-prohibitive – there needs to be a balance between the building code and building affordability (both for the developer and the consumer).
- Not enough collaboration. Ensuring safety for people and property in an industry as complex as construction and development requires information-sharing, transparency and partnership from government, industry and fire services.

What do we need from one another in order to move forward on these priorities?

- Government ministries and agencies need to come together and align the standards they set.
- A willingness to look at testing and evidence in an objective, unbiased way.
- Robust awareness and education programs for everyone involved in the building process, from policy makers to homebuilders to trades people. This includes new resources, grants and incentives for engaging in this education.
- A value and expectation within the system that it is important that all players in are sharing information and trying to learn from one another.
- An approach to planning that involves input from fire services and building development on every plan.

Conclusion

The summit was an informative day full of insights from the participants. While many issues were discussed and priorities were set, a number of common themes emerged from the priorities and the considerations for how they should be addressed. Consistency, communication, alignment, being proactive and planning factored heavily in the discussions. Participants demonstrated an understanding that society is changing and that the approach to ensuring safety, both proactively and reactively, must change with it. This group has identified what they believe the solutions are for these emerging challenges and have outlined a way to move forward.