



BETTER FIRE PROTECTION FOR ONTARIO SENIORS

INTRODUCTION

The Government of Ontario has invited public comment on proposed changes to the Ontario Building Code and the Ontario Fire Code, including mandatory automatic sprinklers in existing care facilities, retirement homes and long-term care homes. These and other related actions are aimed at improving fire safety in residences for seniors, people with disabilities and other vulnerable Ontarians.

WHAT WE WANT

The Canadian Concrete Masonry Producers Association (CCMPA) agrees that mandatory sprinklers are a big step in the right direction for seniors, but believes that seniors also need the protection of more fire-resistant building materials. Studies have shown that the best fire protection is provided through a four-part “balanced design” approach. Balanced design comprises:

- Education — i.e. providing instruction on fire prevention, safety and rapid exits;
- Detection — i.e. smoke and heat alarms and other active systems;
- Suppression — i.e. sprinklers;
- Containment — i.e. fire-resistant, non-combustible masonry walls that contain and prevent the spread of fire.

The CCMPA urges the Government of Ontario to incorporate all four elements in its revision of the Ontario Building and Fire Codes. Specifically, we want the Government to amend the Ontario Building Code to require that partitioning walls between units in residences for seniors, people with disabilities and other vulnerable Ontarians be constructed of concrete masonry. This requirement strongly complements the government’s plan to require automatic sprinkler systems.

Structural collapse — a common occurrence when fire strikes newer buildings constructed with combustible building materials — can render sprinkler systems useless and poses enormous additional risk, not only for people trying to exit the building but for fire fighters entering it.

This is especially important in situations where age and frailty can make escaping a fire especially difficult. The challenges and tragic consequences of fires in retirement homes were made particularly evident in January 2009 when, within days of each other, fires in two large retirement homes in Orillia, Ontario and Saguenay, Quebec killed several residents and forced hundreds of others out into bitter



temperatures in bare feet and pajamas. Saguenay’s mayor commented that, “The whole building burned; the walls fell in.”

ADDITIONAL FACTORS

“The widespread use of lightweight construction and contents made from oil- based/synthetic materials throughout buildings today means that when they catch fire, they burn with more intensity than ever before,” says Carl G. Pearson, Immediate Past President, Fire Fighters’ Association of Ontario. “A material like concrete masonry as a partitioning wall can significantly slow the spread of the blaze and maintain structural integrity, both critical to helping save lives.”

Commonly used drywall and wood frame currently receive acceptable “fire resistance” ratings in industry laboratory testing. However, as real-life situations like Orillia and Saguenay show, these materials burn quickly — much faster than the times suggested by laboratory testing — and are fully ablaze well before staff are able to move dozens or even hundreds of residents out of a nursing home.

“We need to be realistic about the time it takes for such residents, many using walkers or wheelchairs, to exit a burning building,” says CCMPA President Paul Hargest. “Their chances of escape are considerably reduced in a structure built only with wood and drywall.”

Concrete masonry, in comparison, remains standing and has proven to be an effective barrier in fires where half a structure has been razed and the other half — divided by a concrete block wall — has remained structurally intact.

The CCMPA shares the Government of Ontario’s objective of strengthening our building and fire codes to better protect seniors and other vulnerable people. We urge the Government of Ontario to review and support balanced design, to ensure their safety from fire.

ABOUT CCMPA

The Canadian Concrete Masonry Producers Association operates as Region 6 of the National Concrete Masonry Association, and is the representative voice for the Canadian concrete block manufacturing industry. The Association supports concrete masonry producers and suppliers in a number of areas including standards, training, technological research, government relations, and marketing and communications. Through these areas, the Association works to ensure the highest standards of quality and maintain the industry’s strong market presence.



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February 2013