

# Edmonton looks to spur energy-efficient construction after Alberta revokes city green building powers

Author of the article:  
[Lauren Boothby](#)



Published Feb 28, 2024

Condos under construction in Edmonton. PHOTO BY DAVID BLOOM /Postmedia, file

The City of Edmonton is looking for different ways to encourage more energy-efficient construction after the Alberta government announced its intention to revoke Edmonton's and Calgary's ability to demand greener building practices in December.

With nearly 40 per cent of Edmonton's greenhouse gas emissions coming from residential and commercial buildings, the city wants to increase the stock of new emissions-neutral buildings and prepare existing ones for the impacts of climate change in the future. But soon Edmonton won't be able to require new buildings to be more efficient than the province requires through the building code, putting a wrench in one option the city was exploring through Edmonton's community energy transition plan approved by city council in 2021.

That strategy contemplated "increasingly stringent energy codes in alignment with federal and provincial governments," along with boosting energy retrofits. City staff also told council in a November 2022 memo that more stringent energy requirements would drive economic growth in Edmonton by signaling to manufacturers "that the region and province will require windows, (prefabricated walls), insulation and energy consultants."

However, councillors heard at Tuesday's urban planning committee meeting that the province is responsible for choosing the level of energy performance in the building code and the city can't impose stricter rules.

"Edmonton does not have the powers to regulate to a higher level, however, there are other options to advance action," said Kim Petrin, deputy city manager of urban planning, Tuesday. "Without regulation as an opportunity, we need to increase our advocacy and partnership efforts to achieve our climate goals."

According to the province, the expected changes to city charters are meant to preserve housing affordability.

Edmonton, however, still has the options for creating incentives or subsidies to encourage greener construction. City staff will return with more detailed ideas in June after council members voted to accept the initial staff reports on Tuesday.

Expanding the district energy network — essentially creating several centralized energy systems to distribute thermal energy, such as the one currently set up in Blatchford — is one way the city can get more buildings to use renewable energy.

Mandatory energy labeling is another idea.

This would create a disclosure and labeling bylaw where sellers show how much energy a building uses, or create incentives to do so, according to staff's presentation. The city has had a voluntary EnerGuide program for new and existing homes since 2017.

Dave Turnbull, a director with the Canadian Homebuilders Association Edmonton Region, said many builders are already making homes that are energy efficient. The organization also hosts events to promote green building practices, he said.

But, he thinks it's wise that Edmonton doesn't weigh in on Alberta's jurisdiction for building codes, and mandatory labeling could hurt developers and drive up costs.

"Smaller home builders are still using the prescriptive building side of the code and this would have to cause them to change their processes and they would be impacted quite a bit by mandatory labeling," he said.

"I would be remiss if I didn't point out that many of the elements that make housing units more energy efficient also have a higher cost attached to them. Affordability should be part of the consideration for council."

On the other hand, Jacob Komar, co-chair of the city's energy transition and climate resilience committee, urged council members to immediately create incentives since Alberta has taken away one tool that could have been used to tackle climate change.

“This is just an insane ideological battle against climate action. This is why we must act with even more urgency and ambition,” he said.

Komar said Edmonton could require more energy-efficient buildings through rezonings or variances, and through prioritizing permits for greener homes.

“Any time we rezone a parcel, this creates huge value for a developer. We can use our land use bylaw to require higher performance. We want to send a message that if you do base code you will be waiting.”

During the meeting, Mayor Amarjeet Sohi said Edmonton is a leader in climate action and he wants to see the city think outside the box, and work with other orders of government and industry groups, since the Alberta government restricts what they can do.

“Those are the limitations we have through legislation, but there are tools available to us that we must use,” he said. “Why would we not incentivize builders who are building to better standards?”

He also showed interest in adjusting tax rates so people who retrofit their homes aren’t punished with the higher property taxes that accompany the increase in property value.

One report from Efficiency Canada recommended Edmonton draft a bylaw that would make new requirements for emissions-neutral buildings or require this through the building permit process before the province announced pending changes to city charters.