

Residents of Edmonton condo building ordered out over concerns of collapse

Castledowns Pointe owners, tenants told to pack their bags and leave without delay



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According to a notice from property manager Simco Management, engineers investigating the damage caused by a March 12 fire discovered the Castledowns Pointe building was not structurally sound. (Madeleine Cummings/CBC)

Residents of a northwest Edmonton condo building have been ordered to immediately vacate their homes due to concerns the building could collapse.

An official notice to vacate will be posted at Castledowns Pointe on Tuesday evening, a City of Edmonton spokesperson told CBC News.

Residents of the building at 12618 152nd Ave. received a notice Friday from property manager Simco Management detailing a series of structural concerns with the four-storey, 83-unit building, which was constructed in 1999.

According to that notice, engineers investigating the damage caused by a March 12 fire discovered the building was not structurally sound.

"In summary, the report of the structural engineers advises that under certain conditions, all or a portion of the building could fail structurally, (i.e. collapse)," the notice from Simco said.

"Please note that it is the recommendation of RJC that due to the potential life safety issue, that the remaining residents vacate the building as soon as possible,"

A notice from the company posted on the building's front doors instructed residents to leave their units "without delay."

Structural engineering firm Read Jones Christoffersen Ltd. (RJC) made the findings and recommended that residents leave.

Inspection reports obtained by CBC show that parts of the structure were already showing signs of failure, that improperly constructed trusses inside the walls were beginning to buckle, and that some exterior walls were beginning to bow.

In an email Thursday afternoon, City of Edmonton spokesperson Mary-Ann Thurber said the building's owner and manager must ensure the order to vacate is followed until all reviews and structural engineering assessments can be completed and remedial action has been taken to make the units safe to live in again.



Images gathered by engineers demonstrate some of the framing issues uncovered during various inspections of the building. (Read Jones Christoffersen Ltd.)

Thurber said the city will be monitoring the situation, and if the appropriate action isn't taken, it has authority under the Safety Codes Act to take enforcement action against the building owners.

'Pack a suitcase'

The property management firm instructed owners and tenants to pack for at least a week and to take their pets with them.

"Given the severity of the situation, residents are asked to pack a suitcase but to leave the rest of their possessions," Simco said in its notice.

"Do not move out contents or other materials at this time as it is a safety issue. We thank you for your co-operation."

The investigation began in May, when engineers began to examine fire-damaged portions of the building and determined if it was under-designed to carry the structural load of the building.

Because of concerns about the extent of the problems, the engineers began opening up drywall in parts of the building that were untouched by the fire.

'Crushing, splitting and twisting'

A series of reports from the inspectors detail concerns with the building's construction, including various elements that did not match the original architectural and structural drawings.

"The above-noted structural concerns are not inherently related to the fire that destroyed part of the roof but represent latent defects that have only now come to light," the firm told the condo board.

The engineers said their most critical findings included atypical foundations that were vulnerable to deterioration and missing interior shear walls — key structural support elements.

The ceilings were cracking extensively. Parts of the structure were improperly framed. Inward walls were bowing inward. Some trusses were "crushing, splitting and twisting."

"Consequently, the building does not meet the life-safety requirements of the building code for residential occupancy. This is the case regardless of which building code is used."

Engineers said they found three major flaws in the construction of the building.

- Missing blocking at the ends of the trusses that has led to observed crushing failure of many of the second floor truss bottom chords at the corridor walls.
- Main- and second-floor corridor interior load-bearing walls constructed using 2x4 studs instead of 2x6 studs specified on the original structural drawings.
- Partially buried, main-floor exterior walls that are bowing inward due to the earth pressure against them.

The condo board received an initial report Aug. 18 and an inspection of the building was expanded.

The fire damaged 44 units of the building. The remaining 39 units were deemed unsafe.

The notice says the findings were reported to the board in a closed-door meeting on Aug. 30, prompting the evacuation letter issued two days later.



Crushing and twisting of truss bottoms were noted by inspectors who were tasked with investigating the damage caused by a fire on the property. (Read Jones Christoffersen Ltd.)

Rose Ferris, who has owned a unit in the building for 23 years and sits on the condo board, was packing up boxes on Tuesday.

She said she has seen the engineering report and was there when the findings were shared by investigators.

"They found deficiencies in the walls where the structural beams are. They call it crushing," Ferris said.

"The engineering company's report to our management company was to get everybody out because if we had one really big storm, the sway in the building could just be enough that it could bring it down."

Simco Management owner Ray Pratt said his company has organized an emergency meeting Wednesday night with the building's 83 owners and the engineers. It will be held at North Pointe Community Church from 7-9 p.m.

Pratt said Simco is not the original management company for the property and his team is not sure which company constructed the building.

The condo board is collecting questions from owners and tenants to ensure they are answered as soon as possible.

"This is a very difficult time for our residents and the board of directors are committed to working with our professional advisers to gather information and share it with our ownership," the board said in a statement.

"We will be working with our advisers to come up with a plan on many issues, including a plan to allow residents to remove their contents in a measured and safe manner."

'No answers'

Ferris said she will be staying with a friend for a few days but has arranged for a temporary rental as she navigates what kind of insurance she might be eligible for.

She worries about the possible loss of her home, the damage to her finances and what the report findings mean for her retirement.

"It's very emotional and that's the hellish part of it," she said.

"Everyone is very emotional, scared and worried. And of course, we have no answers."

Chantal Piche, who bought a unit in 2020 that was damaged by water during the March fire, only learned about the evacuation while she was checking her mail on Tuesday. She has been living with a friend since the fire.

She said the building is home to a lot of seniors and people with disabilities.

"I feel horrible for them because they thought they had dodged a bullet by being allowed to stay in the building," Piche said.