

Siekierski and Paré: Ottawa can tackle climate change with home-energy labelling

Toronto started working on its green building standards in 2010, and is now on its fourth update. Ottawa is just getting started, and its emerging plans are shockingly low on ambition. But labelling, already mandatory in many American states, can help.

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A construction crew works on new houses in Barrhaven. PHOTO BY TONY CALDWELL /Postmedia

Now that Ottawa's mayor has announced he will not run for office again, let us hope the critical conversation on meeting the city's carbon reduction targets will open up. Until now, Jim Watson has kept the discussion thick with developers, with a token gesture to including the general citizenry who stand to suffer from climate change.

The talks on building standards are a prime example. While transportation usually comes to mind in connection with carbon footprints, the fact is that buildings contribute the most — almost half — of Ottawa's greenhouse gas emissions. To address this concern, Ottawa has drawn up green building standards called "High-Performance Development Standards" (HPDS). These standards

are under review now and will make all the difference in meeting the goal of a net-zero city by 2050. And you have probably not heard about this. That is a problem.

Until very recently, Ottawa has barely consulted the public on this critical issue. An information session was finally offered in December 2021, and two virtual open houses were held in January 2022. Ottawa has a civil society with significant expertise; and yet it is mainly developers at the table. This is a continuation of a pattern already seen in the drafting of the City's Official Plan. If you were a developer, would you be in a rush to instigate standards that would make your job more complex?

Take a closer look and it appears Ottawa is not truly committed to the critical task of weaning itself off fossil fuels. While the cities of Toronto, Vancouver and Saskatoon — to name a few — are all over the existential challenge of our times, Ottawa is lagging. Toronto started working on its green standards in 2010, and is now on its fourth update. Ottawa is just getting started, and while it is targeting net-zero emissions for all new buildings by 2030, the emerging plans are shockingly low on ambition.

The new standard applies to less than half of new units to be built by 2031. Buildings under 2,000 square metres or less than four storeys are excluded. Single-home dwellings, walk-ups or small multi-residential units are not required to meet the HPDS energy efficiency requirements. The tens of thousands of people living in these units — whether as owners or renters — will bear the brunt of costly retrofits once all buildings are required to be net zero by 2050. To add to this, a large swath of already submitted subdivision applications will not be required to comply. This is a lukewarm start.

For no good reason, Ottawa requires lower energy efficiency for buildings than Toronto and the requirement is only applied a year after the standard takes effect. Even more, the city concedes it will not have enough building inspectors to ensure the standards are met. As a result, developers will model the energy performance of a proposed building as part of their application, yet the actual performance may never be verified. "Too difficult." We wonder how other cities manage.

One way to deal with discrepancies in energy efficiency of new buildings is to establish a procedure of home energy labelling. The energy rating of your \$20 toaster is printed on the box; why shouldn't this be true for the biggest financial outlay of your life? Multiple American states require home energy disclosure and it has been mandatory in all EU countries for more than 10 years.

Home energy labelling would generate jobs and spur skills development; Ottawa should explore it as a tool for increased transparency for home buyers and tenants. An additional area of promise for encouraging high energy efficient buildings is financial incentives. The city is now considering an incentives proposal under the voluntary portion of the new HPDS. May it be bold.

The way we build is critical to meeting our climate goals. Ottawa needs to step up its plan for net-zero emission new buildings by 2030 and join other prominent cities already well on the path. Time is running out.

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