

COVID-19: The wake-up call to do better

BY LEITH MOORE

The COVID-19 pandemic has devastated the Ontario economy and impacted the short-term livelihood of millions of families. The immediate recovery imperative will be to fast track projects. It is hard to argue that getting Ontarians back to work should not be a government priority. Getting the cranes moving again on already approved projects is a positive step; construction is a leading employer in our province, and it will be a significant leader in job recovery.



But planning is about the long view. COVID-19 has highlighted serious shortcomings in our planning for resiliency. In a few short months, we have seen a tragic lack of options for seniors' housing, limited solutions to the ability of families to shelter together, homes and apartments unable to properly accommodate work-from-home requirements, sidewalks not wide enough for distance separation requirements for pedestrians, too few parks and accessible open spaces to allow everyone to get outside and be safe.

The pandemic wake-up call should equally speak to us about the urgent need to address an even deeper systemic problem – climate change.

“More of the same does not bring us closer to the better we urgently need.”

Restarting the cranes will serve a key role in our short-term economic needs. But the cranes also remind us that building more of what we usually build is not in itself a solution to the long-term sustainability challenges. More of the same does not bring us closer to the better we urgently need.

We must look to improving the planning outcomes for pipeline projects. COVID-19 should provide the context for a broad planning response to build better. If not now – when?


It will be said that better takes more time and that it costs more. But we can make what we want, and where we want it, easier and faster to achieve. Create an opportunity for pattern approvals, and planners can let the simple go and focus on complex problems where their skills are most needed. Time is money – pre-zoning mid-density brings its proforma profile into line with typical returns. Curb the parking ratio – mid-rise on transit arteries will not have to dig disproportionately. Insert zoning for secondary suites – lane homes and coach homes – everywhere. We can literally create a garden industry for property owners that will be the cheapest of all housing – no land costs.

It will be said that planning policies rely too heavily on intensification and mid-rise and that those forms have proven uneconomic when compared with our typical building options: single-family homes, town homes, and high rises. This may have been true in the past, but it need not be true in the future. If we start to look at whole building life cycle OpX (ongoing operating costs)

as much as we focus on CapX (initial capital creation costs) – and climate imperatives require we do so – then the proforma results tell a different story.

Most significantly, there is an emergent opportunity to harness increasing capabilities in offsite design for manufacturing fabrication with onsite assembly. Reduced costs are generated by faster and more efficient material use. Panelized solutions can be used to build where large crane-based logistics are not feasible. Repeatable BIM/Revit manufacturing solutions can employ offsets in financing and fabrication costs to ensure higher quality thermal envelopes and incorporate active and passive house principles.

It is an understatement to say COVID has been a wake-up call. But we have short memories, and the pressure to just do more of the same – faster – will come with the impetus to push economic recovery.

We need to do better. 



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