

Too much delay on building code

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In the wake of a construction boom that saw nearly everyone who could wield a hammer slapping together a new home in the province, Edmonton Castle Downs MLA Thomas Lukaszuk delivered a hard-hitting report in 2008 calling on his Conservative government to move swiftly to safeguard new home and condo owners. He warned that the province's system of construction and inspection of new homes was not performing adequately to protect Albertans and that a lack of compliance to building codes and provincial standards could lead to "disastrous results."

The MLA, who has since been appointed employment minister, noted that "concerted measures to protect the homeowner and enhance industry compliance are necessary for meaningful change in the quality and durability of residential construction." His report recommended stiffer penalties for building code violations, more frequent inspections, mandatory and improved new home warranty coverage, increased consumer protection, better training for homebuilders and requirements for them to post bonds. The multi-pronged response seemed a reasonable solution to a serious problem that threatened to erode confidence in the province's residential construction industry.

But three years and two municipal affairs ministers later, Albertans are still waiting for Lukaszuk's government to act on his recommendations.

Scores of new home buyers and hundreds of condo owners across the province have been hit with huge bills to bring their new residences up to Alberta building code standards. Some new condominiums are requiring million-dollar fixes to address mould and moisture issues. Home warranties either weren't available or expired before the problems became evident, and now homeowners are confronted with lengthy and expensive court battles to attempt to recover the cost of the repairs. And they are fuming over it.

The province and builders concede there were problems stemming from an influx of fly-by-night contractors, but when the boom bust, it chased them out of business. They say the problem was nothing near the \$3-billion leaky condo fiasco that British Columbia faced following its boom more than a decade ago, but that's little consolation to residents stuck in leaky, mouldy homes.

B.C. learned from its construction crisis and brought in tougher standards and more protection for homebuyers. Ontario, too, has enacted high standards and better warranties for its citizens. But in Alberta, where boom-and-bust cycles are the norm, the province still has not mandated builders to provide new home warranties.

It makes no sense that Albertans purchase warranties for their iPods and cellphones, but are often unaware they don't have a warranty on their new home -- the biggest purchase of their lives. Albertans require a warranty program of sufficient duration that it covers mould and moisture issues that typically don't become evident for several years.

The current minister, Hector Goudreau, vowed last August to introduce legislation this spring to deal with the issue. Albertans may be just a little bit skeptical, since his predecessor promised action by the summer of 2009.

The spring sitting of the legislature begins Feb. 22. It is time to deliver.