



AANDC Case Study 5: Following the National Building Code Brings Expected and Unexpected Benefits to the Opaskwayak Cree Nation

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FOLLOWING THE NATIONAL BUILDING CODE BRINGS EXPECTED AND UNEXPECTED BENEFITS TO THE OPASKWAYAK CREE NATION

“Building codes set standards for high-quality home construction, and while not all First Nations apply building codes consistently or strictly, the National Building Code is the foundation of the housing system,” Cody McGinnis, Director of Housing for the Opaskwayak Cree Nation, 700 kilometres north of Winnipeg, proudly describes.

Says McGinnis, “When the Housing Authority tenders for construction services, we require developers to prove that they are fully licensed and insured, and that they employ qualified workers. We also check with their past clients to verify that they do quality work. Builders who don’t meet our standard, which is the National Building Code, do not build homes for our members.”

Reasons for First Nations housing construction not complying with the National Building Code, despite the federal government putting the requirement to do so in place in 1983 (when federal funding is part of the development financing mix), range from lack of training, to attempts to cut building costs, to inadequate inspections. Indeed, building inspectors may report on building code compliance issues, but on reserves they have no authority to enforce them.

The Opaskwayak Cree Nation’s commitment to the Code, in place for more than a decade, has paid dividends, both expected and unexpected. Among the expected benefits is the lower operating and maintenance costs, and better air quality with vastly reduced mould growth, associated with the housing built since the Code was adopted, compared to homes built earlier. Greater energy efficiency alone, given the cold climate in Northern Manitoba, means more dollars are retained to finance other community priorities rather than to pay hefty utility bills.

Among the less expected benefits of using the Code are the training and employment opportunities it provides. The band council delivers trades training for young members on, or at risk of relying on, social assistance. Funded by up to four partners depending on an individual’s circumstances, the program provides training and work experience that helps participants secure certificates, and ultimately Red Seal certification, in the electrical, plumbing and carpentry trades.

Says McGinnis, “The Nation started training the band membership in the building trades to keep work in the community, and it has done that. But it has also given the participants the opportunity to work and live off-reserve, to expand their horizons and show them that they have life choices they weren’t even aware of before. If we weren’t strict here in following the National Building Code, the trainees would not have the skills they need to work anywhere in Canada.”

Over the next five years a housing boom is expected on the Opaskwayak Cree Nation. 2000 new homes may be built as development of a mine begins. This presents the band with another opportunity to leverage its commitment to quality building practices. Developers working on band land are required to employ band members as part of their construction teams. The members' experience building to the National Building Code standard positions them to take advantage of this construction boom.

While McGinnis's enthusiasm for the National Building Code shines through, he also sees potential for enhancement of the Code to better reflect the realities of building in the North. "I think we need to consider standards that go beyond the National Building Code", he says. "Better-insulated walls and windows to make our homes more comfortable and efficient is where I'd start, but we also need to consider the types of land we develop on here, and standards for developing it. Much of it is soft when it's not frozen, causing homes to shift."

What unexpected benefits will that sort of thinking bring?



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