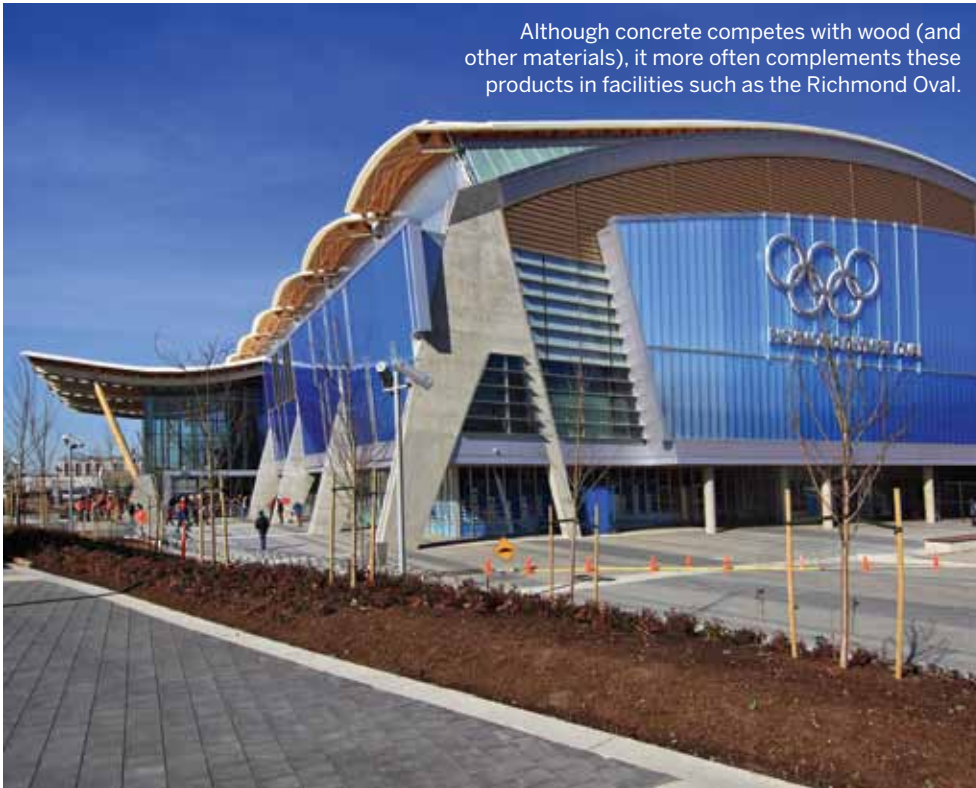


# Right Material for the Right Job

BY CAROLYN CAMPBELL



Although concrete competes with wood (and other materials), it more often complements these products in facilities such as the Richmond Oval.

**R**ecent activities in B.C. with reference to public construction tenders, have sent up warning flags for the construction industry across Canada. The province announced a “Wood First Act” (WFA) which gives preferential treatment to wood over traditional building materials, such as concrete, steel and masonry, in all new publicly funded buildings. The Act, which received Royal Assent on October 29, 2009, requires wood to be used as the primary material in buildings such as schools, community centres, universities, government offices, even hospitals.

B.C.’s concrete industry is a strong supporter of innovation and competitive markets, and finds the preferential treatment given to wood construction difficult to accept. The BC Ready-Mixed Concrete Association (BCRMCA) has been firmly vocal in their opposition to this legislation on the basis that the “wood first policy” is in conflict with provincial procurement process for capital projects (Capital Asset Management Framework - CAMF) and the B.C. construction industry’s four fundamental procurement principles of open, fair, transparent and inclusive to ensure the best value for taxpayers.

BCRMCA president, Bruce Willmer, explains, “The B.C. construction marketplace, including the public sector, efficiently decides daily on what is the right product for the right job, based upon a multitude of factors - technical, economical, environmental, building codes, customer preference, local conditions, etc. Wood is used often in the building industry — when it is the best product for the job, just as is concrete,

steel, brick, glass. Mandating one product as being ‘the right product for all jobs’ goes against principles of both the B.C. construction industry and the CAMF. Instead of letting architects, designers, engineers, developers, contractors, suppliers, trades and their customers decide collectively what materials are best for their project, government officials want to now pass judgment on what is best. BCRMCA wants to know how the public can be confident in the techniques applied, or the wood used, or the price paid when wood is exempted from the checks and balances inherent in an equitable procurement process.”

Like all British Columbians, the concrete sector is concerned about the state of the forest industry and understands its pivotal role in the provincial economy, especially in the ‘heartlands’. With more than 70 member companies and facilities across the province we are directly aware of the importance of a healthy forestry industry to the local economy. The wood industry has been under heavy economic stress in the last few years, and it is our understanding that this legislation will create domestic examples that B.C. can reference for international export markets.

However, what the government has overlooked is that B.C. is the sole market for the ready-mixed concrete industry, which directly employs 9,300 skilled workers and managers (not including the thousands of other related industries such as rebar manufacturers, forming contractors and equipment suppliers) and generates an annual economic impact of more than \$1.4 billion. All the ingredients in concrete — cement, water, and aggregate — are found locally for this made-in-

B.C. product. Concrete, in its plastic state, is a perishable product, and it cannot be shipped long distances, which is why concrete plants exist in almost every community with a population of 5,000 or more in B.C. By forcing builders to use wood instead of locally manufactured concrete, it will likely mean that any economic activity or jobs created in the forestry industry will simply be lost in the concrete industry. The WFP essentially just “robs Peter to pay Paul”.

Propping up the export-oriented forest industry on the back of the domestic concrete industry will not generate a positive economic impact in the province. It will increase the cost of B.C. public buildings by making them more expensive to build and operate. If the forest industry needs help, the B.C. Government should help, but not in a way that damages a 100 per cent-made-in-BC industry and increases the public sector’s overhead costs.

The B.C. government has written Alberta inviting it to pass its own WFA legislation. To date the Alberta government has not expressed an interest in adopting the policy. However, under the Trade Investment and Labour Mobility Agreement, both provinces are required to co-ordinate their industrial, labour and procurement policies. The effect of the WFA and TILMA on each other is unclear.

Many of the environmental claims used by the B.C. government and the wood industry are in conflict with numerous studies from other industries and can be challenged. For example, concrete production has the same carbon footprint as wood. If you choose to include cement production in an environmental assessment of concrete, then you must include the impact of clear cutting in wood. Wood does sequester carbon, but many environmental groups note that clear cutting releases millions of tonnes of carbon both from natural and fossil fuel sources, which are routinely not included in most of the wood industry’s environmental assessments of its carbon footprint.

Concrete provides resistance to long term deterioration, water wind, fire, and earthquakes. The thermal mass benefits and low maintenance characteristics provide the end user with both energy efficiency savings and lower maintenance costs. These all translate into savings for the public taxpayer. The optimal use of all building materials should be the end result for a public sponsored government tender process. Unfortunately the WFA downgrades the potential for the best construction materials being selected for the right job. In the end the taxpayer will bear the brunt of this type of legislation. **CB**

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