



Ontario Association of Architects

April 7, 2020

The Honourable Prabmeet Sarkaria, MPP
Ministry of Economic Development, Job Creation and Trade
7th Floor
56 Wellesley St. W
Toronto, ON M7A 2E7

[sent via email]

Dear Minister,

The Ontario Association of Architects (OAA) is the licensing body and professional association for the province's architects. It was established under a provincial mandate to regulate the practice of architecture "in order that the public interest may be served and protected." The profession's responsibility to the public interest is incredibly important during this pandemic, and architects stand ready to help. Indeed, some of our architectural firms and schools with 3D printers have begun making critical pieces for frontline healthcare workers.

All levels of government have referenced the need for additional health-care units, shelters, and emergency clinics to respond to the COVID-19 crisis. These projects require the expertise of not only architects, but also municipal building officials. It is critical that everyone be able to work together safely, maintaining physical distancing practices. It is also important that processes be streamlined and expedited for this work to move forward as quickly and responsibly as possible. To this end, I offer the following suggestions on behalf of the architecture profession.

1. Fully embrace the potential of digital services.

Ontario should encourage municipalities to implement digitally processed permit applications, reviews, and issuing wherever possible. Cities that have already led the way using new technologies can continue to show leadership and resiliency by leveraging these existing processes to provide services during the COVID-19 crisis. Digital services can also be expanded to include site reviews and inspections by introducing simple protocols such as live webcams and real-time mobile video calls that facilitate physical distancing.

2. Enable municipal building officials to work with their "essential" counterparts.

While professional services were removed from the "essential services" list, Ontario's architects would still be considered essential under many scenarios including various construction projects and services as well as the supply chain provision. By the same logic, we believe that officials in municipal building and planning departments would also be considered essential. While architects are ready and prepared to step into action wherever needed, we need our counterparts to continue operating so we can bring critical health-care projects to fruition.

Maintaining good-quality construction with strong infection control protocols in place is critical. To achieve this, we strongly recommend remote technologies be explored as a means that we can all work together.

If there are functions that can be safely done without risk to planning and building officials, or those serving on associated panels, committees, boards, and tribunals, then that work should continue.

3. Invest in predesign and design activities now.

As a precursor to development and construction, architecture plays a critical role in preparing projects for permit and construction. If the government invests in predesign and design activities now, then Ontario can hit the ground running once it is safe to do so. This will provide opportunities for the construction jobs that will help to quickly rebound our economy once we have emerged from the COVID-19 crisis.

Fortunately, predesign and design work can be safely done without risk of spreading the disease. The majority of architecture practices have already instituted remote working conditions to continue providing their services throughout the province. While we recognize this may not be possible for every single municipality, many municipalities can transition their planning and building officials—as well as related panels, committees, boards, and tribunals—to digital work platforms, video conferencing, and hearings. If annual general meetings for publicly traded entities such as banks and insurance companies can be held online, municipalities should also be able to transition to a digital format.

There are many projects that were identified before the pandemic hit Canada, which are currently on hold waiting to move forward. Now is the time to approve those projects, so that the planning, design, and pre-construction work can take place to ensure shovel-ready projects are in place once the current crisis is over.

4. Ensure that Ontario is open for business.

Affordable housing, hospitals, daycares, schools, community and recreation centres, libraries, emergency services building, and parks need programming and design studies. Many large projects are only possible with the realization of other small and mid-sized projects. These “enabling projects” are complicated and take time. While the construction of some of this work may have been halted, continuing with programming and design will ensure that projects are shovel-ready when it is safe to begin construction. These projects also engage many small and mid-sized practices in communities across Ontario.

As you likely know, the architectural profession has a tremendous impact on the province, enabling 14 per cent of Ontario’s GDP and supporting nearly one million jobs. In some respects, this makes it easy to overlook the fact that the majority of architectural practices are small businesses. It is critical to ensure that Ontario is open for these smaller businesses.

5. Utilize our COVID-19 response to achieve climate stability.

Solutions to this crisis can help mitigate the next one. As we look to develop an economic response to COVID-19 and beyond, there is an excellent opportunity to expand and create new jobs and business opportunities by promoting research and local manufacturing of the building materials needed for the construction industry as it transitions to greater energy efficiency. Products such as triple-glazed windows, advanced insulation, heat/energy recovery ventilation (HRV/ERV) units, geothermal pumps, ceramic radiant panels, grid-tied battery systems, and grid-scale battery backups can all be developed and manufactured in repurposed industrial buildings around Ontario.

While this would create new jobs and business opportunities, an Ontario that invests in new built projects would have the additional benefit of ensuring they are resilient to the environmental changes on the horizon. Incentivizing energy-efficient projects, and encouraging the renovation and restoration of the province's existing building stock, will result in the reduction or elimination of energy costs, impacting long-term operating costs, leaving more money in the pocket for owners of public or private buildings, saving the province money and making it a better place to live, attracting other businesses. The empowering of small businesses to develop innovative solutions to the public health challenge has invigorated innovation in the province. When this challenge is met, that innovation could be refocused to the longer-term challenge of "environmental stability."

The results of these initiatives would create better, resilient buildings, in a healthier environment, while providing a global competitive advantage for the province. The creation of buildings and industries that address sustainability also offers new jobs for Ontarians from across the diverse skill set of people that make up our diverse province. Additionally, as buildings such as social housing, libraries, and community centres are non-profit centres for government, lowering operational costs is a good financial strategy for the future.

If you have any questions, wish to discuss any of this further, or would like the architecture profession's perspective on any matters, I am always open to discussion. I would look forward to working with you.

Thank you for your continued leadership,



Kathleen Kurtin, Architect
OAA, FRAIC
President

