



By DANIEL MACISAAC, SUN MEDIA

Bright orange flames roaring up the side of a garage today brought back painful memories for Edmonton Fire Chief Randy Wolsey – reminding him of the blaze that destroyed 18 homes in the new MacEwan Green neighbourhood last summer.

"That was the MacEwan fire, basically," he said, watching the demonstration fire, designed to show the difference in speed with which flames can eat up a typical garage wall versus the extent to which they're contained by fire-retardant building materials.

But while Wolsey had slammed existing fire and building codes as inadequate last summer following the MacEwan inferno – a case of arson that also damaged 70 other homes – he was in a better mood today.

Wolsey was present as Municipal Affairs Minister Ray Danyluk announced the government's acceptance of 18 of 22 recommendations put forward by a group of stakeholders, including the Edmonton Fire Department, known as the High-Intensity Residential Fires Working Group.

Created in the wake of the MacEwan Fire, the working group targeted the construction industry in particular, recommending the development of safety plans and greater involvement by municipal bodies, including fire departments, in construction projects.

Danyluk said the working group represents the province's effort to be proactive when it comes to high-intensity fires – a fire involving rapid heat release that usually spreads to adjacent properties. Alberta experienced 86 such fires between 2000 and 2007, with roughly one-third beginning on construction sites.

A highlight of today's presentation was the new requirement that fire-resistant drywall be placed under vinyl sidings on homes within 1.2 metres of property lines – an innovation expected to affect some 20% of new homes, adding up to \$10,000 to their cost.

"Our goal is to save lives and property by buying time for people to get out of their houses in case of fire and for the Fire Department to respond," Danyluk said, adding the government is, above all, seeking to strike a balance between safety, cost and technically sound practices in the changes it will implement over the coming years.

Vince Laberge, president of the Alberta chapter of the Canadian Home Builders' Association, was cautious in his reaction to today's announcement. And, like Danyluk, he said he would be studying the recommendations, and their implications, closely.

"We need to ensure that we're doing the right things for the right reasons – and that affordability is kept well in-check," he said. "It'll be the devil in the detail."

"But the government made an administrative commitment to collaborate, and we're looking forward to that."

Fire Chief Wolsey said informal efforts have already made Edmonton construction sites safer places following the MacEwan fire, but said the recommendations should make them safer.

"The likelihood of another MacEwan fire will be lessened dramatically as a result of some of these changes," he said.

The working group's full report is available online on the Municipal Affairs website at www.municipalaffairsalberta.ca.

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