

Best Practices in Building Systems (BPiBS)

BPiBS is a collaborative and interdisciplinary research project focused on improving how housing and building systems function.

What we Heard: Voices from Municipal and Regional Governments in B.C.

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As part of our team's ongoing commitment to learning from the diverse experiences and perspectives of those involved in the housing and building system, we are conducting sector-wide engagement. This includes a series of virtual listening sessions, informal conversation-style gatherings that create space for open dialogue, mutual learning, and reflection. These sessions bring together professionals and practitioners from across the housing and building sectors, including industry, regulatory, research, and community spheres, to share insights, challenges, and ideas in an open and collaborative environment.

Through this engagement, we are gathering perspectives on current challenges, emerging needs, and opportunities in the home building system. We are analyzing these insights to identify themes and scan for early signals and trends shaping futures of building systems. This work is informing pilot projects to integrate knowledge into the graph database (see Alex's [blog post](#)) and guiding the development of future scenarios to support cross-sector strategy-building toward more resilient, sustainable, and desirable outcomes. As we expand pilots and grow the knowledge repository, we will continue to explore applications that bring together diverse ways of knowing across multiple knowledge systems and ontologies.

This first listening session was held in February 2025 with representatives from municipal and regional governments across British Columbia. Participants were asked the following five questions to guide the conversation:

- What comes to mind when you think about existing building and housing systems in your city?
- Given the project's focus on cross sectoral alignment, what do you see as the potential for this initiative towards addressing housing and building system challenges?
- What might you consider to be the most critical areas needed to be address to meet Canada's housing needs?
- Beyond building infrastructure, what are some community or societal elements that might be considered essential when addressing future of housing in Canada?
- How do you and your team stay informed on existing and emerging practices related to housing and building systems?

While many listening sessions and interviews will continue to be hosted, we are sharing the key takeaways and themes from individual sessions to highlight the contributions and insights across different participant groups as they inform our findings. As the project evolves and we continue to learn, we will adapt and refine our approaches to best support meaningful outcomes and impacts (see Elisabeth's [blog post](#) on learning KPIs).

What follows is a summary of the key themes that emerged from the first listening session:

Theme 1: Outdated Construction Practices and Opportunities for Transformation

Participants identified several barriers to increasing construction efficiency but also highlighted opportunities for innovation and transformation. Canada's building sector is anchored in outdated construction practices, including the reliance on traditional stick-frame methods. Barriers to increasing efficiency include the limited size of the construction workforce and a high amount of customization in building that prevents scalability. As one participant commented, there is "room to optimize and move away from custom builds toward a streamlined, economy-of-scale approach." There can be a mismatch between available products and housing typologies: for example, a participant explained that the heat pump technology available is based on single-family homes, so the equipment is oversized for multi-unit residential buildings.

Participants stressed the importance of industrialized construction methods, specifically prefabrication, to increase efficiency. Both prefabricated (prefab) and mass timber were identified as major opportunities for innovation. Prefab was praised for its high quality, potential to deliver economies of scale, and the reduced impact of construction on the surrounding area. Mass timber was described as affordable, sustainable, and energy efficient. Participants pointed to the BC Building Code changes to enable mass timber buildings up to 18 storeys as a driver for future mass timber uptake.

Theme 2: Diversifying the Typology and Tenure of Housing Supply

Participants expressed the need for greater diversity in both the typology and tenure of housing supply. Concern was expressed over how transit-oriented development results in an uneven distribution of concentrated tall towers versus low rises elsewhere. They indicated a desire for more "missing middle" forms of housing, such as fourplexes and small apartment buildings, and suggested distributing density more evenly through mid-rise, mixed-use developments in non-transit centered areas. Concern was also expressed about the potential drawbacks of high-rise buildings, including prolonged and complex construction timeframes and the long-term maintenance of these buildings.

There was reflection on Canada's historical and ongoing reliance on the for-profit sector to deliver housing, with participants commenting on the lasting financial and social benefits that long-term publicly funded housing can provide. They stressed the need for a broader set of actors beyond private developers to contribute to housing delivery, including government and non-profits.

Theme 3: Municipal Inefficiencies and Regional Fragmentation

Regional fragmentation came up frequently, with participants commenting on both disparate housing delivery approaches and regulatory variations across municipalities. Despite municipalities sharing infrastructure systems and populations, the proportion of single- versus multi-family housing being built differs dramatically from one municipality to another. Fragmentation in zoning bylaws and regulations creates inefficiencies, confusion, and frustration for architects, engineers, planners, and developers working across regions.

Inefficiencies in local government permitting processes were a recurring concern, with projects often undergoing multiple rounds of review. As one participant remarked, “it’s not uncommon for an application to go through the system eight times” before a building permit is issued. Delays were attributed to the complexity and granularity of reviews, conflicting or contradictory departmental requirements, and limited use—or limited awareness—of available tools among staff. While the shift toward digitized permitting holds promise for greater efficiency through automation, participants cautioned that without careful management, digitization can introduce new challenges. In some cases, expanding access for multiple reviewers through the digitization of applications has created additional feedback loops, further slowing approvals.

Theme 4: Need for Co-operation, Shared Understanding and Responsibility

The session included reflection on how co-operation from a wide variety of spheres is essential, including between different levels of government, across professions, and among communities. Outside of the City of Vancouver, municipalities are reliant on the BC Building and Energy Step Codes. Participants emphasized that local governments are reaching the limits of what they can do for housing transformation without stronger provincial tools or support. They viewed the Government of British Columbia’s Bill 44 (aimed at increasing housing supply by enabling small-scale multi-unit housing in single-family zones) and Bill 47 (requiring local governments to establish Transit-Oriented Areas (TOAs) around transit stations, allowing for denser housing development) as drivers of municipal action, with one participant commenting on how the density mandates provided municipalities with both the authority and political cover to integrate density into local planning.

The necessity of collaboration across sectors was also highlighted, particularly the value of bringing together voices across construction, policy, finance, and community. Relationship-building, a willingness to compromise, and clarity around value and benefits were seen as essential to success. Beyond collaboration on technical or financial solutions, participants also noted that community acceptance was crucial, including communities being willing to accept trade-offs such as increased density, temporary disruptions, and changing neighborhood character to achieve broader community goals and benefits.

Participants also articulated a need for better, more compelling narratives to drive engagement and alignment. They experience a tension between values-based arguments and policy or fiscal priorities. Current fact-driven arguments are not persuasive across stakeholder groups, even for technologies that demonstrate clear functional and fiscal benefits, such as heat pumps. As a participant explained, “we need better ways of articulating if we’re going to drive greater efficiency in housing.”

Theme 5: Ongoing Learning and Professional Practice in Building Systems

Participants reflected on how they stay informed about emerging housing and building practices, noting that they rely on a wide range of professional and institutional channels, including professional associations, peer networks, and industry groups. They called for a more streamlined, unified system of professional standards and accreditation, since licensing and education standards vary between provinces and result in redundant exams and processes for professionals. They also emphasized the importance of embedding accountability and equity, citing one organization's UNDRIP action plan and its housing working group as an example of integrating social commitments into technical practice.

Participants felt there was value in learning from global precedents and historic examples, noting that "rather than reinventing the wheel, we can look to other jurisdictions to accelerate solutions". However, they also expressed the challenge of turning information into action, explaining that while there is "so much" information available, the difficulty lies in processing and applying it.

Together, the themes from listening session 1 capture the perceptions and experiences of representatives from municipal and regional governments across British Columbia. They suggest that Canada's housing future will hinge on technical modernization, regulatory reform, knowledge mobilization, and broad societal consensus-building, supported by collaborative engagement across all levels of the housing ecosystem.

As we share these insights from the first session, we recognize they represent just one part of a much broader conversation about the future of building and housing in Canada. We invite those working across the housing and building systems sector to reflect on these themes and share their perspectives:

- How do these themes resonate with your own experiences in housing and community development?
- Where do you see the most urgent opportunities for technical modernization or regulatory reform?
- What approaches to knowledge mobilization have been most effective in your work, and where are the gaps?
- How might we build stronger consensus across sectors and communities to support Canada's housing future?

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[<https://onlineacademiccommunity.uvic.ca/bpibs/2025/10/02/what-we-heard-voices-from-municipal-and-regional-governments-in-b-c/>] by madelaineprince.