

Dept. of Safety and Professional Services: State leaders visit Appleton, tour mass timber event space, discuss sustainable building and community resilience

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Appleton, Wis. – Last week Wisconsin Insurance Commissioner Nathan Houdek, Department of Safety and Professional Services (DPS) Secretary Dawn Crim, and Department of Financial Institutions (DFI) Secretary-designee Cheryl Olson-Collins toured Poplar Hall, an Appleton event space built with mass timber. The group also met with the development, design, and construction team.

Mass timber refers to a family of engineered, load-bearing wood construction materials. Already popular in Europe and increasingly so in Canada, mass timber is more recently emerging in the United States as a renewable and aesthetically appealing alternative to traditional commercial construction. In its recent Commercial Building Code Update, DPS is recommending expanding allowable use of mass timber in more building types so that it is a more viable option for more projects. The agency is also developing a set of mass timber guidelines as resource for designers and owners who are interested in using mass timber in their projects.

“We have been doing our part by updating the code to create greater opportunity for mass timber expansion in Wisconsin, and our guidelines will help designers and building owners who have less experience with mass timber but are interested in using wood structurally in their projects,” Crim said. “Touring existing mass timber buildings and talking with the decision makers help us learn about other barriers that may remain even after the code updates and guidelines are approved and implemented.”

For example, few architects and builders have experience using mass timber, and that means that few lenders and insurers have exposure to the buildings. Misconceptions about safety and risk can complicate projects and deter mass timber use. Crim says engaging Commissioner Houdek and Secretary-designee Olson-Collins can help raise awareness of mass timber and its unique features and advantages in the insurance and financial services industries.

“Insurers play an important role in climate resiliency,” said Commissioner Houdek. “New, innovative building materials like mass timber present exciting opportunities so we are working to make sure that insurance companies understand the resiliency benefits.”

Olson-Collins also acknowledged the broader redevelopment of the former riverfront brownfield site, which once was home to a paper mill.

“The opportunity to see this project and discuss it with the developer, builder, architect, and others involved in this project gave us a full picture of what it takes to turnaround a brownfield and provide both community and economic benefits,” said DFI Secretary-designee Cheryll Olson-Collins. “We learned that the environment improves, and it can be a good way to be financially responsible. Building sustainably can also help mitigate the financial risks of climate change.”

The visit was part of the Stronger Wisconsin campaign to raise awareness about community resilience and ways sustainable, renewable building materials can support community resilience efforts. [Learn more about Stronger Wisconsin here.](#)