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British Columbia News

# Okanagan students to benefit from greener, more affordable housing

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Vernon - Generations of students will now be able to study in their communities, thanks to new, environmentally friendly mass timber housing being constructed at Okanagan College's Vernon, Salmon Arm and Kelowna campuses.

"Affordable housing is key to building strong, healthy communities. This new student housing will help students focus on their studies, and its mass timber construction will create good jobs for local workers," said Premier John Horgan. "Our government remains committed to helping people get through the pandemic now, while building an economic recovery that works for everyone. I am proud that this project will do both."

The project will include construction of 376 additional affordable student homes in five new student housing buildings, including a combination of single, double and quad suites — resulting in a 260% increase in the total number of student beds available. Currently, Okanagan College has no student housing in Vernon or Salmon Arm and 144 student beds housed in a single building on the college's Kelowna campus.

"Students in Vernon and across the Okanagan will soon have affordable and sustainable housing close to school, so their focus can remain on their education and building a better life for themselves and their community," said Harwinder Sandhu, MLA for Vernon-Monashee, on behalf of Anne Kang, Minister of Advanced Education and Skills Training. "We are listening and responding to student housing concerns in the most affordable, innovative and environmentally sustainable way."

The new buildings will be constructed using mass timber – a renewable resource with a lower carbon footprint compared to traditional concrete construction. British Columbia is a leader in the use of mass timber as an innovative way to reduce the carbon footprint of the building sector, while supporting good-paying jobs for people in communities throughout the province. The energy efficient design also supports the Province's commitment to furthering CleanBC priorities, as the buildings will meet Step 4 of the BC Energy Step Code.

The Province's \$66.5-million investment in the Okanagan College project will increase economic opportunities for Indigenous and local workers in the forestry sector. Government expects the project will create more than 500 direct and indirect local jobs.

The project is part of government's 30-point housing plan. The plan includes a BC Student Housing Loan Program for public post-secondary institutions that provides access to funds to help finance student housing projects over six years. Of the \$67.5-million total project cost, \$36.3 million is being provided through a provincial grant and \$30.2 million from a provincial loan. Okanagan College will contribute \$1 million towards this development.

Since February 2018, the Province has funded an additional 2,816 student beds at post-secondary institutions. In September 2020, the Province announced an investment of \$108 million towards a \$114-million new, affordable student housing project at the British Columbia Institute of Technology, also a mass timber project.

Funding student housing is part of the government's 10-year housing plan, Homes for BC. This includes a \$1.9-billion investment through the Building BC: Community Housing Fund to create more than 114,000 new affordable rental homes for low- to moderate-income British Columbians.

**Quotes:****Anne Kang, Minister of Advanced Education and Skills Training –**

"Today's announcement will go a long way in helping students live and study close to home in their communities in the Okanagan. We are working to make our communities stronger by investing in sustainable and affordable housing."

**Jim Hamilton, president, Okanagan College –**

"This investment is extremely timely, with increasing demand for more affordable housing being felt in each of these communities. Offering more students more housing on campus will help Okanagan College as it continues to improve accessibility to post-secondary education, and will benefit the communities we serve by easing the pressure on the very limited rental accommodations available to students and others."

**Evan Smith, board member, Okanagan College Students' Union (OCSU) –**

"The OCSU is excited about the announcement on the investment of student housing, particularly in the region I live in. There are so few affordable, student-friendly housing options here. This is a much needed and long overdue improvement. It's well known that the rental market in the Okanagan has been overpriced and at capacity for several years now, which has impacted thousands of students. Paying as much or more in rent per month as college tuition is not acceptable. We need a long-term solution for Okanagan College students to provide access to affordable housing while we complete our studies."

**Sean Leslie**

Communications Director

Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Training

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**Backgrounders**

Post-secondary housing investments in B.C.

- The Okanagan college mass timber student housing will consist of:
  - Kelowna: two buildings, 216 beds, worth \$36.4 million
  - Vernon: one building, 100 beds, worth \$18 million
  - Salmon Arm: two buildings, 60 beds, worth \$13.1 million
- Construction of the project is expected to start in fall 2021 and be completed in fall 2023.
- The Province is investing \$450 million through a loan program to contribute to the construction of approximately 5,000 student beds over six years.
- An additional 3,000 student beds will be built through non-government partnerships and institutional self-financing, for a total of about 8,000 new beds by 2028.
- As of March 2021, approximately 5,000 new student beds were underway or completed.
- In mass timber buildings, the primary load-bearing structure is made of solid, engineered wood. These buildings can be one-fifth the weight of comparable concrete buildings, while still meeting performance standards for safety, structural resilience and fire protection.
- The BC Energy Step Code is a provincial standard intended to provide an incremental approach to achieving more energy-efficient buildings that will help the Province meet its goal of having all new buildings be net zero energy ready by the year 2032. Step 4 of the BC Energy Step Code achieves an energy cost savings of approximately 40% compared to constructing to a LEED Gold standard.