

Homes



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NEW WAY OF BUILDING FILLS NEED FOR RENTAL HOUSING

Wood-frame construction is quicker to build, more affordable and better for the environment

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Special to Postmedia Network

An Edmonton-based builder has just broken ground on an Ottawa project that aims to address Ottawa's rental crisis in an uncommon way.

Rohit Homes' recently announced the Horizons at Crystal Bay, a development that will include 185 units spread across two six-storey buildings on Carling Avenue near Andrew Haydon Park. Construction is expected to be finished in 2027.

"It's a fantastic neighbourhood. It's got a lot of great natural amenities," says Chris MacKinnon, Rohit Homes' Ottawa vice president. He cites Crystal Bay's proximity to the Ottawa River, Bayshore Shopping Centre and the Queensway-Carleton Hospital as a selling point.

Ottawa is Rohit's first market beyond Alberta and Saskatchewan, and Horizons at Crystal Bay is the company's second project in the

city. The first, a 51-unit building called the Level at Bells Corners, is due to open later this year. MacKinnon says Rohit considered many cities when it decided to expand. It chose Ottawa because it spotted a market gap it could address.

Rohit has a track record of building low-rise apartment complexes using wood-frame construction, but few Ottawa companies were doing the same. "We saw it as a chance for us to come in and bring this expertise to the marketplace that we didn't see at scale here," says MacKinnon.

He explains that wood-frame construction—already common in townhome and single-home construction—allows his company to build apartments more quickly and affordably than other companies can using steel and concrete.

On the environmental side, wood has a lower carbon footprint throughout its lifecycle than either steel or concrete. And because new



Participants at a recent groundbreaking ceremony for Horizons at Crystal Bay include from left to right: Mike Love, president, Demarco; Adil Kodian, executive vice-president Rohit Homes; local councillor Theresa Kavanagh; Chris MacKinnon, vice-president, Rohit Homes Ottawa and Rob Pierce, senior vice-president, Tomlinson.

forests can be planted to replace harvested trees, it is also seen as more sustainable.

One limitation of wood-frame construction is that it is suitable primarily for buildings of six storeys or fewer, MacKinnon says. As a result, developers using the technique need larger parcels of land than companies

building taller steel structures, to achieve the same economies of scale. That limits the feasibility of wood-frame apartment projects in dense central neighbourhoods, such as Westboro and the Glebe. However, in more suburban locations, such as Bells Corners and Crystal Bay, the approach makes more sense.

When Rohit first contemplated entering the Ottawa market, it was open to building both rentals and condos. It ultimately chose to focus on rentals due to high demand, particularly for less-expensive units, says MacKinnon. According to Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, Ottawa's 2024 rental vacancy rates stood at just 0.7 percent for units renting for between \$775 and \$1,449, and at 2.0 percent for apartments renting for between \$1,450 and \$2,149.

MacKinnon says that the money Rohit saves by using wood-frame construction processes allows the company to offer higher-end finishes and more amenities than are common in many purpose-built rental apartments — something Rohit dubs "attainable luxury." For instance, Horizons units will have flourishes such as vessel sinks and walk-in showers with rainfall shower heads. Designed to surpass requirements in the National Energy Code of Canada for Buildings by more than 40 percent, the apartments will also have high-efficiency appliances.

About three-quarters of the apartments at Horizons will be one-bedroom-plus-den or two-bedroom units, with one-bedroom units and studios making up the remainder. The smaller units will likely appeal to single professionals, while the larger units are aimed at Rohit's other target market: boomers and older Gen Xers looking to downsize.

"We are trying to design a space that's a little bit more comfortable and cozy for that empty nester," says MacKinnon. He sees the project's location in Crystal Bay as an added benefit for that demographic. "They're a layer or two away from sort of the hustle and bustle that you're going to see with a more traditional infill neighbourhood."

Building amenities will include 24 electric-vehicle charging stations, a fitness centre, and a rooftop patio with sweeping views of the Ottawa skyline, the Ottawa River and Gati-neau Park. In addition, each building lobby will have extensive seating and a fireplace to encourage residents to hang out in the common area, says MacKinnon. "We do try to create a bit more of a community vibe with our buildings."

On the exterior, step-backs, recessed balconies, fibre-cement siding and two shades of brick will provide some visual interest.

The Bells Corners and Crystal Bay buildings are just the beginning of Rohit's plans for Ottawa. The company expects to build a total of 950 rental units in the city by 2029. "We're not here to just, you know, make a quick buck and then move back to Alberta," says MacKinnon. "We're here to play a part in helping solve some of the housing challenges in