

# Skills crisis looms in construction

While many workers are readying to retire, fewer young people are joining the industry

**BY GILLIAN SHAW**

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The average age of workers on the building sites of Concert Properties is 52.

One of the largest construction crews in Vancouver reports an average age is 56.

Framing costs on some projects have jumped by as much as 100 per cent, with much of the hike attributable to increased labour costs.

These are among some of the statistics delivered to a Vancouver Board of Trade forum Thursday on the construction sector, and they are evidence of a growing skills crisis in the province.

The crisis is two-fold: Workers are getting ready to retire; and young people and their parents are shunning the construction industry as one not as worthy of their attention as white-collar pursuits.

British Columbia's construction employers can no longer count on the mantra "if you build they will come" to attract the skilled workers they need to fill vacancies created by the province's building boom. There's little expectation that workers from across Canada will come flooding to B.C. to help build for the 2010 Olympics, as they did for Expo '86.

"The circumstances today

in British Columbia are very different than what they were for example in Expo '86," said David Podmore, president and chief executive officer of Concert Properties, one of the province's largest real estate development companies.

When Expo development was on, other areas of Canada were suffering economic slowdowns, a factor that

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pushed construction workers west to find jobs. But today, Podmore pointed to billions of dollars of construction work going on coast to coast.

"I don't think we can count on the migration of individuals and workers that we saw in the mid-'80s that helped us build a lot of infrastructure in a very short time."

The industry also suffers an image problem. After years of gloom in the industry and little or no job security, it's not regarded as a career path to sure success.

"We are seeing an unprecedented demand for skilled labour, and one of the things I attribute that to is that we haven't seen young people entering the trades," said Podmore. "The average age of workers on our sites continues to climb, and the average worker today is 52 years old."

"It's the rare carpenter and former that would be on the job site at 55 doing the same work they were doing at 25."

Podmore said on any given day there are 215,000 people working in residential construction in B.C., while the demand is for 260,000 people.

"There is a dramatic short-

fall," he said.

Keith Sashaw, president of the Vancouver Regional Construction Association, said 91 per cent of his members expect to see increasing labour costs.

"We're focusing our efforts on attracting youth," he said. "We also have to look at attracting people who may have left the industry during the downturn."

"We have to get them the skills and training to bring them back up to speed."

Pointing to survey results released this week by the Canada West Foundation, labour analyst Kerry Jothen told the forum the concern over labour shortages is spilling over into the general population.

In British Columbia, the need to ensure a skilled labour force came only second to improving the health care system as the highest policy priority identified by survey participants.

"It is certainly on people's minds," said Jothen, chief executive officer of Human Capital Strategies.

"In terms of skilled labour, there will be problems if we rely on the status quo and old solutions."