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DSPS Co-hosts Mass Timber Roundtable in Milwaukee, Continues Work to Expand Allowable Use of Mass Timber in Wisconsin Commercial Buildings

MADISON, Wis. – Department of Safety and Professional Services Secretary Dawn Crim traveled to Milwaukee today to attend a mass timber code roundtable conversation with other government and industry experts. The event was co-hosted by DSPS and Korb + Associates Architects, the architecture firm for the 25-story Ascent mass-timber tower currently under construction in Milwaukee.

“This is an exciting time for the design field, the construction industry, our agency and the administration,” Crim said. “Interest in mass timber is growing around the world, and Milwaukee is a key part of that conversation because of Ascent. With work underway to update our commercial building code, we need to learn everything we can so that we can make the best code updates for Wisconsin. We want to make sure we eliminate any arbitrary barriers to the safe use of mass timber in Wisconsin buildings.”

Ascent started making headlines before crews even broke ground. The building would certainly be the tallest mass timber building in Wisconsin. As the design evolved, it became apparent that Ascent might be the tallest mass timber hybrid tower in the world. When it is finished, it will be.

“Mass timber is going to be an increasingly important and common construction material around the world,” said Jason Korb, principal at Korb + Associates. “It outperforms traditional building materials in fires, earthquakes, and extreme winds. Plus, it is a renewable resource that has a negative carbon impact. And, when exposed, mass timber creates a natural aesthetic that people like and want. There are many, many compelling reasons to use mass timber in commercial construction.”

The challenge, however, is that current Wisconsin building codes do not allow for buildings like Ascent. Korb and their design and engineering team, Thornton Tomasetti, had to pursue extensive variances to Wisconsin’s code requirements in order to secure approval for construction.

“This project was a bold vision from the start, and we knew we would have to go about things differently to make it reality,” Korb said. “But the science, the industry, the public all support it, and the City of Milwaukee did, too. Because of the work we did together, we are making history and, we hope, paving the way for expanded mass timber use in Wisconsin.”

Crim said her team will gather feedback generated during the roundtable and will use insights to inform work on building codes.

“We are fortunate that we have so much expertise in mass timber right here in Wisconsin,” Crim said. “There is a lot of knowledge and a lot of momentum, and we want to take advantage of both as we modernize our building codes. Wisconsin will be better for it.”

The Department of Safety and Professional Services issues more than 240 unique licenses, administers dozens of boards and councils that regulate professions, enforces state building codes, runs the state fire prevention program, and maintains the award-winning Wisconsin Enhanced Prescription Drug Monitoring Program, which is

a key tool in the multi-faceted public health campaign to stem excessive opioid prescribing. A fee-based agency, the Department of Safety and Professional Services is self-sustaining and receives no general fund tax dollars for its day-to-day operations. With five offices and 250 employees throughout Wisconsin, DSPS collaborates with constituents and stakeholders across a wide range of industries to promote safety and advance the economy.

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Jennifer Garrett, Communications Director, Wisconsin Department of Safety and Professional Services, (608) 576-2491, Jennifer.garrett@wisconsin.gov