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A worker guides a glulam beam into place during construction of the First Tech Credit Union headquarters in 2017 in Hillsboro.

Mass timber construction climbs in popularity

By MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI

Capital Press

Construction of new mass timber buildings has climbed over the past decade, but experts believe the demand for such structures is still in its infancy.

Before reaching their full potential as building materials, however, mass timber wood products must still overcome skepticism from financiers, insurance companies and others in the construction industry, experts say.

"Mass timber is the start of something and it's going to get much bigger," said Bill Parsons, vice president of operations at Woodworks, a nonprofit that assists builders with such projects.

Parsons and other experts spoke about the market outlook earlier this month at the Mass Timber Conference in Portland.

Mass timber broadly refers to large structural

elements made from lumber products, such as cross-laminated timber panels composed of lumber boards glued together in alternating directions.

Another variation is mass plywood panels that are engineered from plywood rather than lumber. These products are strong but light, allowing developers to design much taller and larger structures from wood than they have traditionally.

Last year, about 370 building projects relied on mass timber products, compared to roughly 20 projects in 2014, Parsons said. "We've really seen this go from nothing to what it is."

That upward trajectory is expected to gain steam, with developers projected to undertake 11,000 mass timber projects a year by 2035, he said.

Mass timber's momentum began in the Pacific Northwest but it has since picked up throughout North America, which now has nearly 1,400 structures built or designed with such wood products, he said.

The popularity of mass timber was initially strongest among developers of office buildings, due to its visual appeal and acoustic properties, Parsons said. However, the shift toward working from home due to COVID has hindered office building development.

"With the pandemic, there was a big pause," he said.

The shift may ultimately work in the favor of mass timber, since the material's appearance sets a building apart from others and may attract workers back to the office, Parsons said.

The material is finding a market among developers of buildings with hybrid commercial, retail and residential uses, he said. Schools, laboratories, multi-family housing and government buildings also offer opportunities for mass timber.

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