

Valuing B.C.

STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS PROVE VITAL TO BC ASSESSMENT'S GROWING SUCCESS



PHOTO: COURTESY APPRAISAL INSTITUTE OF CANADA

BC Assessment's professional appraisers work with property owners and strategic partners to ensure accurate assessments.

BC Assessment

BC Assessment, the Crown corporation that values all residential and commercial properties province wide, is well known the world over for being one of the top organizations of its kind. Yet its success is still a well-kept secret here at home, where assessment appeal rates are dramatically lower than most other assessment jurisdictions in North America. BC Assessment retirees are in high demand for their consulting services abroad, and other countries regularly send delegations to study BC Assessment's structure and success.

Simply put, BC Assessment's success derives from two main strengths: accuracy and efficiency.

Since 1974, BC Assessment has had a clear mandate to provide uniform property assessments that provide the foundation for British Columbia's property tax system. Providing exceptional customer service has been a cornerstone of the organization's success and the numbers show it: of the 1.9 million property assessments completed for the 2010 Assessment Roll, only 1.5 per cent were appealed to the independent Property Assessment Review Panel.

"Creating well-accepted property assessments begins with accurate property information and then working hard to keep our customers satisfied," says Connie Fair, president and CEO of BC Assessment. "The more accurate and up to date the data is, the better the job we can do at coming up with an accurate market value of a property." Such accurate information, she continues, is a result of strong partnerships with the custodians of that data, such as the Land Title and Survey Authority, the B.C. Real Estate Association, Landcor Data Corporation and other real estate professionals. >

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BC ASSESSMENT

BC Assessment is also closely allied with the province's 187 municipal and regional governments, with whom it exchanges information on a daily basis to establish B.C.'s property tax base. BC Assessment also contracts services to 55 First Nations communities in the province and works closely with many different provincial government agencies.

“Under our traditional method of an appraiser physically going to a property, we can reassess about 14 properties a day. With the use of imagery, we’re looking at about 45 properties a day, so the productivity increase is huge.”

— *Connie Fair, president and CEO of BC Assessment*

Local governments pass on information about changes of address, building permits and the like, and in return BC Assessment determines the value of all land and improvements, especially new construction, explains Sam Weller, executive director of the Government Finance Officers Association of B.C.

B.C. property taxes generate approximately \$6 billion annually, or half of the province's total combined municipal budgets, says Weller. And with property valuation the responsibility of an independent authority – rather than a function of the municipalities themselves, as it was formerly – property assessments can be completed faster, cheaper and more accurately than if the burden were decentralized.

Another of BC Assessment's valued partnerships is with the Integrated Cadastral Information Society (ICIS), a non-profit organization and public-private collaboration founded to create a digital map base of all the land parcels in B.C. “Accurate mapping data is critical to our ability to reassess property if we are heavily reliant on technology,” says Fair. “We must know we are working on the right property.”

Established in 2001, “ICIS was formed to merge the digital mapping information from our various members and provide an integrated web map service back to them with this geospatial data matched and consolidated into a single layer,” explains Barry Logan, executive director. “We provide a valuable, cost-effective service to our members, eliminating the duplication of effort and standardizing the contribution and access of disparate data

PHOTOS: (LEFT) COURTESY APPRAISAL INSTITUTE OF CANADA; (RIGHT) COURTESY YOTTA M/S



sets.” In addition to BC Assessment, ICIS members include local governments across B.C., provincial government ministries and agencies such as GeoBC, and members of the utility sector such as Telus, Shaw, Terasen and BC Hydro.

But even the most accurate data is useless without the skills to interpret it. BC Assessment’s most valued resource is its employees, and thus has established several partnerships with educational institutions, most notably with the Sauder



School of Business at the University of British Columbia, to invest in its people.

According to Fair, in the assessment industry it’s not as simple as putting out a “help wanted” ad and selecting from a pool of qualified and experienced candidates. “Educationally, we have to grow our own,” she says, explaining that BC Assessment regularly

Left: Most appraisers at BC Assessment have professional accreditation through either the Appraisal Institute of Canada or the Real Estate Institute of B.C. Above: High-resolution street-front photos taken from specialized vehicles are checked against BC Assessment’s property database.

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“The future of analyzing real estate will be through electronic maps and photos combined with data. It is much more intuitive for the appraiser to see real estate data displayed through photos and digital maps than to simply look at tables of numbers.”

— *Connie Fair, president and CEO of BC Assessment*



Left: High-tech photographic tools enable appraisers to view hard-to-access properties.

hires new staff with undergraduate degrees in relevant fields and then puts them through appraisal courses at UBC’s Sauder School of Business throughout their career while giving them hands-on training at work. With those courses tied to professional designations, employees work toward both certificates and diplomas from Sauder as well as professional credentials such as the Real Estate Institute of British Columbia’s “RI” or the Appraisal Institute of Canada’s “AACI.”

“BC Assessment has enrolled students in our programs for many years, and in the last decade we’ve paid close attention to the relationship between what we do and what they want,” says André Gravelle, director of real estate credit programs for Sauder. In doing so, Sauder has tailored the practical

elements of its courses to meet BC Assessment’s unique needs. “A lot of the people who have written material for our courses, or who are current tutors and instructors, are existing or retired BC Assessment staff members. It is a nice way of ensuring that we’re providing the education programs BC Assessment wants.”

The value to BC Assessment is clear: it receives tailored educational programming without having to create it in-house, and all backed by Sauder’s world-renowned reputation for its online courses.

With knowledgeable BC Assessment staff working with information that is as accurate and up to date as possible, the next step is to accomplish all this efficiently. “When we were created in 1974



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Left: BC Assessment works closely with business owners to determine accurate assessments. Dense urban areas provide a challenge with many property types.

there were 800,000 properties on the Assessment Roll and we had 700 staff; now there are 1.9 million parcels and we have 650 staff," notes Fair.

"We as an organization are very committed to our business evolution by trying to become more efficient through leveraging technology and information. One of the directions we're taking with respect to urban residential property is looking to re-engineer how we collect data."

The most recent innovation involves the purchase of aerial and street-front images to allow appraisers to complete their assessments remotely. Recent pilot projects in Nanaimo, West Vancouver and North Vancouver showed only about five per cent of properties had to

be inspected in person; the rest could be accurately assessed using images brought to the appraiser's desktop.

With such encouraging results, BC Assessment is currently in discussion with local governments (who often purchase the same imagery for their own purposes) to work out cost-sharing agreements. The plan is to apply this methodology to residential properties in urban areas. ■

This promotional feature was prepared for BC Assessment by BCBusiness magazine's Special Advertising Features Dept. Writer: Tiffany Sloan. For information contact VP of corporate features John Cochrane at 604-299-7311. Email: jcochrane@canadawide.com

COMING SOON: 2011 ASSESSMENT ROLL

BC Assessment will release the 2011 Assessment Roll to property owners and local governments beginning January 1. If you are a property owner, be sure to check your assessment carefully and contact the local office listed on your notice in January with any questions. Or, visit www.bcassessment.ca to access the free, easy-to-use e-valueBC search tool to compare against other property assessments and sales information plus view videos and read information about the assessment process and its relation to property taxation.

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