

ESTABLISHED 1912

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# HIGHER STANDARD NEEDED FOR HOME INSPECTORS

Protections have been watered down from 10 years ago, **Bob Hamm** writes.

British Columbia will soon mark the 10th anniversary of provincial licensing of its home inspectors. Sadly, like a number of high-profile policy and management failures of the last government, home inspection licensing has not benefited the consumer as promised.

Before January 2009, the Home Inspectors Association of B.C. encouraged the B.C. government to introduce provincial licensing of all home inspectors to rid the province of untrained and unqualified home inspectors. Before 2009, anyone could print a business card and declare themselves a home inspector. After tremendous prodding, the B.C. Liberal government introduced licensing and placed oversight for the industry under the auspices of Consumer Protection B.C., a government agency that regulates a diverse number of industries and services.

Initially, Consumer Protection B.C. left it to the legitimate and proven home inspection associations in B.C. to field consumer complaints, ensure compliance of inspectors and provide continuing education and upgrading of skills. But just as the housing market was heating up, the government dropped a bombshell: home inspectors no longer needed to belong to any industry organization. This put a stop to the requirement that inspectors upgrade their education and skills and ended the requirement for individual inspectors to be bound by the strict ethics of membership in a professional organization such as HIABC.

The NDP government has kept its promise to put

in place a housing strategy "aimed at curbing demand, reducing tax evasion, closing real estate market loopholes and cracking down on speculators who don't contribute to our province and our communities." The Horgan government has succeeded in lowering the real estate temperature, but the policy failures of the previous government that precipitated its action are about to be felt by today's home and condo buyers in the realm of home inspections.

In that overheated market, listings often saw multiple bids. Buyers, in fear of losing out on the purchase, skipped home inspections. Their choice, of course, but



*We know of inspectors who co-market a listed house with a realtor, one even hanging their inspection service signs from the realtor's For Sale sign.*

one that often saw them face unexpected repair bills after their purchases. As noted by The Vancouver Sun (Buyer 'fear' grips housing market, Sept. 26), the success of the government's affordability policies means buyers now have more time to consider their purchase and get a home inspection.

With markets having cooled, and consumers having the time to get a home inspection to help them make an informed choice, they're facing a home inspection industry which, in our view, is closer to where it was more than 10 years ago instead of the high-standard industry we called for through regula-

tion. The benefits of making houses and condos more affordable for first-time buyers, as this government has ensured, are quickly lost if the home inspectors consumers rely on are not up to par.

Part of this is owed to problems that arose from the runaway housing market and relate to the role of some home inspectors in the real estate transaction. A home inspector works for the consumer, not for the interests of realtors looking to make a sale. It's why real estate agents are supposed to take care not to recommend one particular home inspector or inspection business over another or to have formal arrangements with home inspectors. In the overheated housing market, we learned that a number of home inspectors — no longer bound to the ethics of an industry

organization such as HIABC — had moved into partnership with realtors.

We know of inspectors who co-market a listed house with a realtor, one even hanging their inspection service signs from the realtor's For Sale sign. Does anyone think a prospective buyer would get an unbiased consumer-first inspection as a result? That such practices are occurring, under regulation, and under the sole oversight of Consumer Protection B.C. shows how far regulation has deviated from consumer protection in the 10 years since its launch. The drive-to-the-top in home inspection standards has become a race to the bottom.

Consumer Protection B.C. has many industries to cover in its responsibilities. And in the case of the home inspection component, our experience is that after a strong start 10 years ago, its compliance with the direction that it water down its requirements of home inspectors has been regressive for consumers. When someone calls Consumer Protection B.C. about a problem with an inspection of their house or condo, and is directed to "call a lawyer," it's clear the B.C. Liberals abandoned the promises they made about the benefits of regulation to consumers.

The Horgan government was left with a number of critical issues to fix when it took office, housing affordability being one. Home inspections are not as visible as home affordability, but they are certainly an integral part of it.

We've been encouraged by the B.C. government's progress on the major and complex parts of home affordability. Action on the home inspection component will ensure sub-par inspections, training and ethics don't undermine the B.C. government's housing-affordability success.

It's time to renew the drive-to-the-top in home inspection standards. It's time to ensure the regulatory structure ensures industry management and development, promotes continuing education, training, and ethics for home inspectors, and serves the consumer with a cost-effective approach. It's been 10 years of decline in home inspection standards in B.C. and consumers should no longer be unprotected on the most important and most expensive purchase of their lives.

*Bob Hamm is president of the Home Inspectors Association of B.C.*