

Certification of Local Government Building Officials: White Paper

Background

Local governments employ building officials to monitor the compliance of building design and construction with the BC Building Code (or the Vancouver Building By-Law in the City of Vancouver) and other Provincial building regulations. Building officials review plans and inspect buildings under construction, and act as a “second set of eyes” that increases the likelihood that non-compliance and defects that jeopardize health and safety are identified and corrected. Consistency in Building Code administration and application is primarily achieved through the activities performed by building officials.

Despite the key role they play in the construction process, there are no mandatory minimum qualification or continuing education requirements for BC building officials. Building officials’ levels of knowledge vary, which can lead to inconsistencies and errors in how the Building Code is applied, interpreted and enforced. Most other Canadian jurisdictions require building officials to be certified or licensed.

Consultation with participants in the building regulatory system has reinforced the crucial importance of qualified individuals, including building officials, to Code compliance and building safety. The construction sector has also repeatedly expressed concerns about inconsistent application of the Code by building officials across jurisdictions.

A workforce of highly-skilled building officials is essential to an effective and efficient building regulatory system. Mandatory certification of building officials by the Building Officials’ Association of BC would increase uniformity in Code application and enforcement, and ultimately building safety, by ensuring that the individuals who review plans and inspect buildings under construction are qualified to do so. And by requiring building officials’ responsibilities to be consistent with their level of certification, the proposal would ensure that a local government does not adopt a Code administration regime that it does not have the resources to carry out.

Proposal

The Province is proposing a system of mandatory certification of building officials, including continuing professional development. The Province is partnering with the Building Officials’ Association of BC (BOABC)¹ to deliver the program. This proposal would:

- require all building officials employed by local governments to meet qualifications and obtain certification from the BOABC;
- limit local governments to employing only certified individuals as building officials; and
- limit the functions that building officials could perform to their level of certification.

¹ Established by the *Building Officials’ Association Act*, the BOABC is a self-governing association that represents local government building officials. The BOABC has 486 local government building officials among its members, which represents a large proportion of the building officials in BC. The BOABC is also an accredited certification body meeting the Standards Council of Canada National Standards System CAN-P-9 Conformity Assessment and currently offers its members a voluntary certification and continuing education program.

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The BOABC's current certification program would continue essentially unchanged, with three levels of certification that reflect three general categories of building construction, each of increasing complexity:

- Level 1 – one and two-family dwellings regulated under Part 9 of the Building Code;
- Level 2 – other buildings regulated under Part 9 of the Building Code, including some small commercial buildings; and
- Level 3 – larger or more complex buildings regulated under Part 3 of the Building Code, such as hospitals, schools and high-rise condo buildings.

In addition to the certification requirement, BOABC membership would become mandatory. This requirement supports the certification process and provides the BOABC with a means to ensure that certification is achieved and maintained by each person employed as a building official in the province.

At each level, building officials would become certified by passing examinations and gaining work experience at the level for which certification is sought. Two years of work experience is required for Level 1 certification, and one extra year each for Level 2 and Level 3. Continuing professional development would be required to maintain certification.

The proposal includes a four year transition period for existing building officials to confirm their certification. New building officials who are seeking certification, but have not met the examination or work experience requirements, would obtain "intern" status. Their work would be subject to supervision by certified building officials until they had gained enough experience to write the necessary examination(s) and meet the work experience requirements.

Q's and A's: Certification of Local Government Building Officials

Who would the certification requirements apply to?

- Any individual who administers or enforces the BC Building Code and other Provincial building regulations for or on behalf of a local authority would need to be certified by the BOABC. The term "building official" includes plan checkers, building inspectors, building officials and plumbing officials.
- This would include building officials and plumbing officials employed by or working under contract to a municipality, a regional district, a treaty first nation or any other authority that administers or enforces Provincial building regulations.
- Administration or enforcement of Provincial building regulations could include:
 - reviewing or checking building plans for compliance with Provincial building regulations;
 - inspecting and/or monitoring for compliance with Provincial building regulations; and
 - signing permits and/or rendering decisions on a building project's compliance with Provincial building regulations.

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- The certification requirement would not apply to management positions that do not take an active role in administration or enforcement of Provincial building regulations, as described above.

Would professional architects and engineers who are employed as building officials need to be certified?

- Architects or engineers working as building officials would not need to be certified by the BOABC, if their job description requires a designation as a registered architect or professional engineer. In this case, they would be required to obtain the Certified Professional designation².
- Architects or engineers working as building officials would need to be certified by the BOABC if their job description does not require a designation as a registered architect or professional engineer. These individuals would have the option to become certified as a “Part 3 Specialist.” This designation would authorize a registered architect or professional engineer to administer or enforce Provincial building regulations on large complex (Part 3) buildings only.

Who would pay for the costs of BOABC membership and certification?

- Most local governments currently cover the costs of BOABC membership, training and examinations for their employees.
- As part of the certification proposal, building officials would also be required to obtain 30 continuing professional development (CPD) points over three years. Points could be earned by attending Homeowner Protection Office seminars at an average cost of \$39, or by attending BOABC zone meetings, participating on BOABC committees, writing a technical article for the BOABC website or instructing, all of which have no cost to the member. The following link gives more detail on CPD:
<http://www.boabc.org/assets/Membership/Cont%20Professional%20Development%20Program.pdf>
- Current BOABC fees are:

• Annual membership	\$448
• Study session (two days) (10 CPD points)	\$290
• Code change seminar (10 CPD points)	\$290
• BOABC Education Seminar (12.5 CPD points)	\$448
• Examination ³ (5 CPD points, if passed)	\$224

² The Certified Professional (CP) program prepares architects and engineers to act on behalf of the City of Vancouver or the City of Surrey to provide administrative oversight of the Code compliance of large building projects. The presence of a CP on a project substantially reduces the City's usual monitoring activities. The Association of Professional Engineers & Geoscientists of BC and the Architectural Institute of BC are working with the City of Vancouver to take over administration of the program in 2012.

³ One examination must be written to obtain Level 1 and 2 certification. Five examinations must be written for Level 3 certification.

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What happens if a local government doesn't have any building officials at higher levels of certification?

- A number of smaller local governments currently contract for building permitting, plan review and inspection services with larger municipalities or regional districts, or with individual building officials. Local governments without building officials at higher levels of certification could continue this practice.

Would local governments be able to employ 'trainee' building officials who are not yet certified?

- Yes. Building officials who are aiming for certification at a given level, but have not yet met the examination or work experience requirements would register with the BOABC as **interns**. Their work would be subject to supervision by a more senior building official until they have gained enough experience to successfully write the necessary exam(s) and meet work experience requirements.
- Local government building officials perform a range of functions. When a local government employs an intern, only those functions directly related to Code administration or enforcement would need to be supervised, and the degree of direct supervision required would diminish as the intern gains experience.
- However, until the intern becomes certified at the level at which he or she functions, any Code administration or enforcement decisions would be signed off by an appropriately certified building official.

How would the BOABC ensure that interns are supervised appropriately and consistently throughout the Province?

- The BOABC would establish a standardized, prescribed documentation process to record the work experience and supervision of interns.
- The documentation process would be similar to that employed in other professions. For example, it could require that interns and their supervisors maintain a log of the types and levels of work experience gained during the internship period.

Does this mean that all local governments with interns would need to employ at least one senior certified building official?

- Currently, some local governments employ a Level 1 or 2 building official and enter into a service contract with another local government for their complex buildings. Some other local governments enter into service contracts for all of their building regulation services.
- Supervision or mentoring of interns may be included in the terms of a service contract with another local government.
- Just as they do now, each local government would decide whether it is feasible to employ their own certified staff or use this service contract option.

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How long would interns need to be supervised?

- An intern would have to meet both examination and work experience requirements for the level of certification he or she is seeking.
- The intern would be supervised or mentored until he or she obtained certification at the level of the job. The duration of this supervision would depend upon the level of certification that the intern was working toward, and the length of time the intern took to complete the examination requirements.

What training is available to help building officials get their certification?

- The BOABC has an agreement with the British Columbia Institute of Technology to recognize its correspondence training for Level 1 certification and classroom training courses for other certification levels. BOABC also offers its own study sessions, including Code change seminars province-wide, as well as an annual three-day Education Seminar.
- The BOABC is also:
 - developing new course material and examinations with the Alliance of Canadian Building Officials Association and the International Code Council and new plumbing courses and examinations through an agreement with the Plumbing Officials' Association of BC;
 - planning for broader delivery of training through more institutions, including online delivery of core Code education in collaboration with colleges and universities; and
 - providing more regional study sessions and education conferences.

Why would the Province use the BOABC to certify building officials?

- The BOABC is an accredited certification body meeting the Standards Council of Canada National Standards System CAN-P-9 Conformity Assessment.
- The BOABC certification program establishes standards, develops and delivers training programs, tests knowledge and competency, and issues certificates to qualified individuals. The BOABC has been certifying building officials in BC since 1981, and has been delivering professional development services to building officials in the Yukon Territory since 1975.
- BOABC certification is recognized through a reciprocity agreement with the Province of Ontario, and the BOABC has established an equivalency protocol with the Province of Alberta. Similar agreements are under development with other Canadian provinces and territories.
- The BOABC is a founding member of the Alliance of Canadian Building Officials' Association's national certification program. This certification is recognized throughout Canada.

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- BOABC's certification is widely recognized by local governments throughout the Province as an indication of knowledge and competency in their recruitment of building officials.

How would the Province implement a certification requirement?

- Existing building officials would be able to continue to work as building officials for up to four years. During that time, they would need to pass any required examinations and become certified. If they are already certified, and their certification is in good standing, their certification would be confirmed.
- Existing building officials who are not BOABC members would also be required to obtain membership.
- New entrants to the occupation would have to become BOABC members and either become certified at the level at which they intend to work, or be registered and work as interns.