

VIEWPOINT

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Sub standard

THE provincial government's move to license home inspectors is to be applauded — with this extremely serious caveat: Solicitor General John van Dongen's reported assertion to members of the B.C. chapter of the Canadian Association of Home and Property Inspectors that he does not intend to implement their recommended standards on a provincial basis because they are too stringent shows a short-sighted, even backward approach to legislation.

The upshot of this approach, should it play out the way the property inspectors' association fears, will negatively impact consumers.

Standards, in any industry, are intended to limit the field to the few who have undergone the necessary training to meet them, not legitimize

throng of lay people with a generously applied rubber stamp.

Consumers look to standards, particularly those endorsed by the government, for quality control and piece of mind.

When it comes to property, we in this province have learned the hard way that purchasing a sub-standard product can lead not only to financial ruin for the buyer but homelessness, lawsuits and even long-term health problems.

The places we live, like the food we eat and the medical care we receive, play such a role in our health and well-being that they should be subject to the highest available standards. Ignoring the ample advice of industry professionals is not only imprudent governance, it's dangerous.

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Home inspectors seek standards

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A group representing B.C. home inspectors says the provincial government will put consumers at risk if it fails to adopt high industry standards when it starts regulating the trade.

Bill Sutherland, former president of the Canadian Association for Home and Property Inspectors' B.C. chapter or CAHPI(BC), said his

organization has spent five or six years consulting with the government over appropriate industry standards.

However, he said, B.C. Solicitor General John van Dongen recently informed the association that proposed provincial regulations will be "nowhere near" the organization's nationally accepted standards.

"You have to wonder why the government won't listen to people who have spent an enormous amount of time, energy and money

See MLA page 3

MLA Sultan to push for higher standards

From page 1

putting together these standards," Sutherland said.

B.C. home inspectors are currently unregulated, meaning anyone can perform inspections and advise consumers on property purchases, regardless of their training or qualifications.

"If you would like to be a home inspector this afternoon go buy some business cards and a flashlight. That's all you need. And you probably don't need the flashlight," Sutherland said.

According to CAHPI(BC), inspections start at around \$350 but for consumers the real cost of a botched inspection is purchasing damaged property.

"If there are problems with the home and you buy it, you are responsible for fixing it. No one is going to help. Your insurance isn't going to help you out. You are stuck," Sutherland said.

CAHPI(BC), a voluntary organization, requires its 250 members to meet national standards decided by national CAHPI members and other property inspection specialists. Members pay an annual fee of \$600.

Among its nearly 400 pages of standards, CAHPI(BC) requires its registered home inspectors to submit all inspections in writing, carry insurance and perform a minimum of 250 inspections that comply with standards of practice.

Sutherland said the CAHPI standards, along with recommendations by the Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation and Human Resources and Skills Development Canada were made available to van Dongen in the lead up to drafting provincial standards.

However he said van Dongen told his organization point blank that adopting their recommendations for

provincial standards would be "too strenuous," "too onerous" or that "too many people couldn't meet it."

Meanwhile, Sutherland said, home inspectors already registered with CAHPI(BC) would have to pay an additional fee to the province to be licensed to lower standards.

Cindy Rose, spokeswoman for van Dongen, told the North Shore News provincial regulations were still under discussion and she did not yet know how or if they would differ from industry recommendations. An announcement regarding provincial licensing is expected in the "near future."

"Once home inspectors are regulated under the Business Practices and Consumer Protection Act, homebuyers will be able to select inspectors knowing that they are licensed and qualified to do the job," Rose wrote in an e-mail.

That's just what concerns home inspector and CAHPI(BC) member James Dobney. He said implementing provincial regulations that are lower than a voluntary organization's would only serve to confuse and mislead consumers. "Why bother to regulate it at all if you set the standards so low that everybody who does it is going to meet the standard," he said.

"The consumers would be better served if they just looked for membership in an association that had good standards. That's going to make more sense. . . . But people will say, 'Well, if the government sanctions it, it must be OK.' I've seen all kinds of industries where that's not necessarily the case."

Dobney pointed to the leaky condo crisis of the '80s and '90s as a lingering example of lax regulation.

"There were lots of leaky condos that were built and inspected and passed by city planners and building

inspectors and look what happened there."

For Dobney, who said his company, James and Associates, is the largest company serving the Mainland, high standards help ensure both consumers and inspectors know what to expect.

Inspectors should check a building's heating, plumbing and electrical systems and appliances and even poke around in some unlit places, like crawl spaces. However Dobney said inspectors will not lift carpets or cut holes in the walls.

Similarly, on the North Shore where slope issues are common, home inspectors will not do a full geotechnical analysis to determine the likelihood of a landslide, but Dobney said they should check for signs of movement in and around the house.

They should be familiar with the type of problems they are inspecting and potential problems that could arise with the geography, said Dobney. "You get up on Grouse Mountain or in the British Properties and wind and rain are going to have more effect on you than they would in Langley. So there are local issues which inspectors should be familiar with."

North Vancouver MLA Ralph Sultan supported the government's move to "wade into the licensing field," but said CAHPI(BC)'s push for higher standards was a "legitimate case."

He offered to help CAHPI(BC) take their concerns forward to the solicitor general, saying "the standards should be tightened up. I presume (CAHPI) is on solid ground."

"There's enough evidence . . . that lots of fully-qualified builders and contractors have done renovations and putting up new buildings that aren't as well made as they should be," Sultan