

# Qualification of Local Government Building Officials: Response to Consultation

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## Preface

Two Provincial discussion papers, *Modern Building Regulatory System* and *Certification of Local Government Building Officials*, were released in February 2012 to present government's proposals for a more efficient and effective building regulatory system. The papers were widely distributed to local governments and the building construction sector for their comments.

## Changes to the proposals

Changes to the initial proposals have been made in response to both operational pressures and stakeholders' comments. These changes are summarized below and incorporated into the body of this paper.

### Mandatory certification for building officials

The initial proposal for mandatory certification through the the existing Building Officials' Association of BC (BOABC)<sup>1</sup>'s certification program has changed. Stakeholders expressed concerns that local governments' costs and challenges in recruiting building officials would increase significantly if certification were required, particularly in relation to continuing professional development and work experience requirements.

Instead, building officials would be required to meet Provincial qualifications. These qualification requirements would differ from the initial proposal for BOABC certification as follows:

Work experience: The work experience requirement would be eliminated.

Continuing professional development: This requirement would be limited to mandatory attendance at a BOABC-endorsed seminar or successful completion of a BOABC-provided exam on major changes to the BC Building Code.

Implementation period: Four years in total. Unqualified building officials would be required to write the Level 1, 2 and 3 exams within the first two years. They could rewrite Level 2 or 3 exams, if necessary, during the remaining two years.

Professional engineers and registered architects: These professionals would be exempt from the qualification and BOABC membership requirements.

## Background

Local governments employ building officials to monitor the compliance of building design and construction with the BC Building Code 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

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<sup>1</sup> 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 qualification body meeting the Standards Council of Canada National Standards System CAN-P-9 Conformity Assessment and currently offers its members a voluntary qualification and continuing education program.

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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 within and across jurisdictions.

A workforce of highly-skilled building officials is essential to an effective and efficient building regulatory system. Minimum Provincial qualification requirements for building officials will 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 qualification, the proposal would ensure that a local government does not adopt a Code administration regime that it does not have the capacity to carry out.

### **Provincial Qualification Requirements**

The Province is proposing a system of mandatory minimum qualification requirements for building officials. The requirements would be administered by the BOABC under a formal agreement with the Province. This proposal would:

- require all building officials employed by local governments to meet Provincial qualifications and obtain membership in the BOABC;
- limit local governments to employing only qualified individuals as building officials; and
- limit the functions that building officials can perform to their level of qualification.

The qualification requirements would consist of examinations designed to assess knowledge of the Building Code and continuing professional development. Three levels of examinations, developed and administered by the BOABC, would 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 these requirements, continuing professional development related to major changes to the Building Code would be required to maintain qualification.

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The proposal includes a four year transition period for existing unqualified building officials to meet the qualifications. New entrants to the profession would also be required to successfully write the Level 1, 2 or 3 exams, depending on their responsibilities, within the implementation period.

### **What is the difference between certification by the BOABC and Provincial qualification requirements?**

**BOABC certification** is voluntary.

- *To become certified*, a building official must:
  - obtain membership in the BOABC;
  - successfully write the necessary exams at Level 1, 2 or 3; and
  - achieve the necessary work experience for Level 1, 2 or 3.
- *To maintain certification*, a building official must:
  - obtain the required number of continuing professional development points over a three year period; and
  - meet a Code change maintenance requirement when a new edition of the Code is adopted.

**Provincial qualification** would become mandatory.

- *To become qualified*, a building official would have to:
  - obtain membership in the BOABC; and
  - successfully write the necessary exams at Level 1, 2 or 3.
- *To maintain qualification*, a building official would have to:
  - attend a BOABC-endorsed Code change seminar and/or successfully write a BOABC-provided Code change exam within six months of the availability of a Code change seminar or exam. This requirement would apply to all major Code changes.

### **Who would the qualification 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 qualified. 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 the BC Building Code;
  - inspecting and/or monitoring for compliance with the Building Code; and
  - signing permits and/or rendering decisions on a building project’s compliance with the Building Code.

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- The 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 meet Provincial qualification requirements?**

- Architects or engineers working as building officials would not need to meet qualification requirements or BOABC membership requirements.

### **How would the Province implement a qualification requirement?**

- Existing unqualified 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 the examinations corresponding to their level of responsibility.
- If they are already certified, and their certification is in good standing, they would automatically be qualified at their level of certification.
- Existing building officials who are not BOABC members would also be required to obtain membership within six months.
- New entrants to the occupation would have to become BOABC members and become qualified at the level at which they intend to work.

### **Why would BOABC membership become mandatory?**

- If all building officials are BOABC members, then the BOABC code of ethics applies and the BOABC can investigate complaints and discipline members. Mandatory qualifications and membership in a professional association is the model that is commonly applied to professions via the “college” system (e.g., the health professions).

### **Who would pay for the costs of BOABC membership, examinations and continuing professional development?**

- Most local governments currently cover the costs of BOABC membership, training and examinations for their employees.
- Current BOABC fees are:

○ Annual membership	\$448
○ Study session in preparation for exams(two days)	\$290
○ Code change seminar	\$290
○ Examination <sup>2</sup>	\$224

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<sup>2</sup> One examination must be written to obtain Level 1 and 2 qualification. Five examinations must be written for Level 3 qualification.

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

- 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 qualification could continue this practice.

### **Would local governments be able to hire building officials who are not yet qualified?**

- Yes, but only during the four year implementation period, during which the unqualified building officials would need to pass the examinations corresponding to their level of responsibility.
- After that, local governments would be required to hire qualified building officials.

### **What training is available to help building officials meet the qualification requirements?**

- The BOABC has an agreement with the British Columbia Institute of Technology to recognize its correspondence training for Level 1 qualification and classroom training courses for other qualification 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.