



# Building Better Homes and Communities

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### Dial-in Bookings and Reports for Inspections Abbotsford, British Columbia

#### The issue

While there have been many initiatives to streamline the permit approval system, booking and reporting inspections for new housing construction has received less attention to date.

In 2001, the City of Abbotsford's system for scheduling inspections and obtaining reports was antiquated, labour intensive and did not make use of the City's new computerized development tracking system. Builders had to phone or visit a department clerk during regular business hours to request inspections. Municipal staff assembled inspectors' schedules manually and builders were called with the results of the inspections.

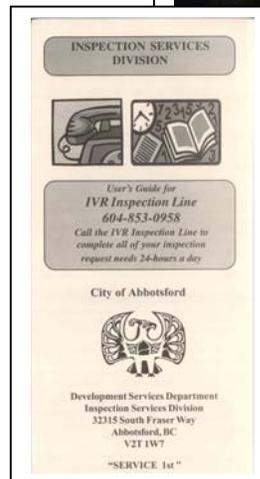
#### The plan

Abbotsford was awarded a \$10,000 ACT grant towards a \$75,000 project to investigate, test and implement a new Integrated Voice Response (IVR) system for the inspection department.

The goal was to improve efficiencies for the City and for builders by streamlining inspection booking and scheduling procedures. An automated, telephone-based system for booking requests and reporting or receiving results would be tied in to the existing tracking software. The plan also included system integration and testing, staff training, and promotion to industry and the public.

#### The project team

Team members represented Abbotsford's departments of Development Services, Information Services, and Economic Development; Fraser Valley Home Builders'



Association; Abbotsford City-Industry Development Advisory Committee; the architectural community; and a software expert.

#### The results

The new system allows builders to phone in at any time, seven days a week, enter their permit number(s) and book one or more inspections.

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It automatically checks the requested date and confirms the inspection appointment, or allows builders to check alternative times. The department only contacts builders personally if an inspection cannot be accommodated as booked.

Inspectors receive a computer-generated daily work schedule. After each inspection, they leave the traditional inspection slip with the results on site. They also phone in the results, so that builders can retrieve them by phone at any time.

Changes during the design phase improved user-friendliness. "To begin with," says Grant Acheson, Director of Development Services, "builders had to book each inspection individually. Now, the system allows several common inspections to be booked at once."

For the City, the new system has meant faster information collection and sharing. Abbotsford handles approximately 2,000 building permits (including 600 dwelling permits) a year. With most of the conventional inspection requests now computerized, the City has seen a staff savings equivalent to one half-person year. This should help to slow future building permit fee increases. Of approximately 20% of inspections not booked through the new system, most of these represent homeowners doing their own projects.

Balbir Raiwal, owner of Raiwal Developments Ltd., has found telephone bookings convenient. "I can make my calls at night, after work is finished on the site," he says. More than one in ten appointments are booked at night.

Garth Rattee, construction superintendent for Auguston / Blauson Homes Inc., also welcomes the system's efficiency. "It doesn't take the place of all personal contact," he says. "For example, if you want to change an inspection the same day it's scheduled, you still have to talk to someone. But in general, this system works for me. It's more efficient, I can book inspections at any time of the day, and I can do three or four at once."

By fall 2003, 80% of inspections were booked through the automated system. In future, Acheson says, the City would like to expand the options to allow Web-based bookings as well.

Streamlining this area of the development approvals process has had a welcome effect on time efficiency and costs, contributing to housing affordability.

### **Related reports**

*Review of Issues, Impacts & Options in the Building Inspections Systems* (Atlantic Home Building & Renovation Sector Council, 2002)

ACT case study: *Streamlining the Approvals Process for Certified Builders: Pilot Project* (Julie Tasker-Brown, Montreal, 1997)

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