

Assessment Services
2005/2006 Business Plan

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Service Nova Scotia and Municipal Relations

Mandate & Strategic Goals

Service Nova Scotia and Municipal Relations is the lead service delivery agent of government for programs and services to business, individuals and municipalities. Its mandate is to become the single window service provider for government's non social services as well as provide municipalities with a single access point to the provincial government.

Departmental Senior Management has identified the goals of the 2005/06 business plan as follows:

1. Partner with municipalities to promote effective local government and healthy and vibrant communities
2. Modernize departmental programs and infrastructure to support citizen-centred service models and to address emerging issues
3. Improve accessibility & quality of government services in a cost-effective manner, while maintaining security, integrity and accuracy of records/data
4. Provide a motivating work environment and develop staff to meet current and future departmental needs

Assessment Services' goals, strategies and priorities, outlined on the following pages, support the strategic goals of Service Nova Scotia and Municipal Relations.

Assessment Services

Vision

Assessment Services' Management has articulated the following vision of the organization:

In 2008 the organization will be financially and organizationally self-sustaining. The organization will consist of centralized and specialized teams of valuation experts and support services, and will be accountable to Nova Scotia's municipal governments for the delivery of the provincial assessment roll. Instead of building competencies the organization may choose to "buy" expertise in key areas. As well, it will market products and services to other assessment jurisdictions. Technology will be enhanced and the organization will have engaged in a succession management strategy, the result being an environment where clients enjoy optimum level of service and staff are recognized and rewarded for its delivery.

Mandate

Assessment Services is legislated to provide accurate, defensible and equitable market based assessment values to Nova Scotia's fifty-five municipal governments on time and within budget. The assessment roll is used by municipal units to generate revenue for municipal services and for the calculation of municipal contributions towards education, corrections and the distribution of provincial grants. The division also delivers annual assessment notices to Nova Scotia property owners.

In addition to municipal governments and property owners, Assessment Services' client groups include divisional staff, commercial sector agencies, advocacy groups and other levels of government. The major activities of Assessment include preparation of the annual and preliminary assessment roll, an appeal process, client relations and communications, business standards and assessment technology support.

Organizational Profile

There are 160 staff employed with the Assessment Services Division. Twenty-five are located in Halifax supporting the five regional offices and two sub offices located in Dartmouth, Kentville, Bridgewater, Truro, Sydney, Yarmouth and Port Hawkesbury.

Goals / Measures

In support of departmental goals to:

- Improve accessibility & quality of government services in a cost-effective manner, while maintaining security, integrity and accuracy of records/data
- Modernize departmental programs and infrastructure to support citizen-centred service models and to address emerging issues
- Provide a motivating work environment and develop staff to meet current and future departmental needs

Assessment Services is pursuing the following divisional goals:

- increase the efficiency & effectiveness of the assessment roll
- improve ability and strengthen capacity of the Division's human resources to meet present and future demands
- increase client confidence in assessment products and services
- increase recognition as a leader in property assessment

The success of divisional goals will be measured by monitoring operational activities and reporting on the results related to the quality of the assessment roll. These measurements include quality of the assessment roll, adjustments of value under appeal, satisfaction levels of key client groups, and progress in staff development.

2005/06 Target Measures

- % of assessment value to property sales: 95 - 105% assessment to sale
- % of assessment lost through appeals: less than 2%
- Client satisfaction (property owner survey): Maintained at or increased from 70%
- Client satisfaction (municipal survey): Municipal Survey benchmark Target 65%
- % of assessors who meet educational requirements or will complete requirements in 2005

Strategies / Priorities / Budget

Background

In past years , a major strategic priority of Assessment Services has been the implementation of a valuation strategy to improve the quality of the assessment file and a communications strategy to increase client confidence in product and services. These strategies are now integrated with the operation of the organization. In 2004/05, Management identified three key strategic directions for Assessment Services:

IT Strategy

An expansion of the Division's web based technology by undertaking a review of business processes and workflow (focusing on field inspections) while at the same time undertaking a gap analysis of the requirements to operationalize the commercial CAMA valuation module licensed under the maintenance agreement with the OASIS vendor, Cole Layer Trumble (CLT).

HR Strategy

The implementation of a human resource planning exercise that addresses the educational and training requirements of new and seasoned staff, in particular updating training programs and professional requirements for assessors. In addition , the division has begun planning for anticipated staffing retirements by undertaking the development of a succession management program for key positions.

Game Plan for Agency Status

The preparation and initiation of an implementation plan for transitioning the division from government to an agency status. This resulted in the development of a terms of reference for the creation and the appointment of an Assessment Management Board made up predominantly of municipal government representatives. For a period of 18 months the Board will assume responsibility for decisions affecting the ongoing and effective delivery of property assessment services in Nova Scotia. The Board will also decide and recommend to the Minister of Service Nova Scotia and Municipal Relations, the preferred option of the delivery of Assessment Services.

Bill 40

With the May 2004 passage of legislation amending the Assessment Act, Assessment Services became responsible for the development and implementation of a capped assessment program (CAP). This required the development of new technological applications and changes to divisional business processes. Undertaking these activities became a new and major priority for the division in 2004/05.

Strategic Priorities for 2005/06

Building on the priorities and events of 2004/05, Assessment Services has identified five strategic priorities in 2005/06 :

- further development and enhancement of the Information Technology Strategy with a major priority being to obtain funding to procure a new commercial valuation system that integrates with the division's internet-based appraisal system.
- incorporation of changes to business processes and technology into operational plans as a result of Bill 40 and the new CAP Assessment Program
- an expanded human resource strategy that addresses the division's anticipated human resource needs, implements a succession management plan and responds to staff training and development needs.
- the implementation of a commercial valuation strategy that addresses the challenges of an expanding commercial and industrial base in Nova Scotia and the need to recruit and train qualified commercial and industrial valuation staff
- a renewed emphasis on communications and education building on the formalized communications plan which has been in place in 1996, and with a particular focus on municipal relations. Assessment's comprehensive communications program includes activities such as annual public surveys on service levels, yearly activity reports to municipalities, education, training and orientation programs on assessment, media relations and internal communications with staff. This year a survey of municipal staff will help us to benchmark municipal satisfactions levels.

Environmental Scan / Challenges for the Future

Authority and responsibility for decisions affecting the ongoing and effective delivery of property assessment services will, for a period of eighteen months, be assumed by the interim Management Board. During this period of time, the Board will also make recommendations to the Minister regarding a new governance and service delivery model for the organization. However, there are pressing issues that will need to be addressed in the interim by the board - among them the issue of funding for technology, human resources, communications and accountability, evaluation and implementation of the CAP Program and challenges in industrial and commercial valuation.

Funding for technology

The current computer assisted mass appraisal system has been in operation for 16 years. By April 2007 mainframe support will be discontinued by the vendor. There is a growing risk of error and system failure with the current commercial valuation system which is not integrated with the mainframe and is supported by spreadsheet applications. Assessment Services needs funding approval to procure a new system.

Staffing requirements

At January 2005, nearly 20% of Assessment Services' employees are eligible for retirement. By January 2008, that number will increase to nearly 33% of existing Assessment employees. Assessment faces competition for its staff from employers in other government sectors as well as the private sector. It has become increasingly difficult to hire qualified staff persons, particularly in the areas of commercial and industrial assessment expertise.

Bill 40 implementation - CAP Program

With the May 2004 passage of Bill 40, Assessment Services became responsible for the development and implementation of a capped assessment program (CAP). This required the development of new technological applications and changes to divisional business processes. The 2005 assessment roll marked just the beginning of the implementation of this new program; as it continues and develops, new business processes and procedures must be developed and technical applications written and resources - human and financial - dedicated to these activities. Given how new the program is, it also remains to be seen how property owners will respond and what its impact will be on the appeal process, and day to day operations of the assessment function.

Commercial and industrial valuation challenges

Nova Scotia's commercial and industrial base has undergone expansions and change in recent years. With the advent of new industries such as Sable gas, new infrastructure such as windmills, and the perception among some that property taxation is a disincentive to industrial development, the assessment of industrial properties has become increasingly challenging.

Assessment Services is also engaged in an on-going review of heavy industrial properties (HIRT) to ensure that there is uniform application of assessable assets.

Nova Scotia Power Inc., is exempt from property taxation and pays a grant in lieu (\$31 million) to the Province which distributes the grant to municipalities. A portion of the grant - \$9.9 million - is distributed based on the total assessment of NSPI in each municipal unit as a percentage of NSPI total assessment in the province. Some municipalities are now questioning the current valuation of NSPI assets in their municipality. A complete review and revaluation of the 800 NSPI properties, including power generation plants, is presently underway with expected completion in 2007.

Communications and Accountability

It is critical for the quality of the assessment product that we continue to improve communications and accountability with municipal clients and internal staff. Assessment Services needs to survey municipalities on service levels. We also need to continue internal communications programs and review operational and business goals on a 90 day cycle to ensure relevance and accountability.