Administration Guide

Public Relations

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1.0 Introduction

1.1 Scope of a Public Relations Program

A well-defined public relations program should be an integral part of the overall package of services delivered by assessing authorities.

Property owners pay taxes based on estimates of market value placed on their properties by assessors. The valuation exercise is somewhat technical in nature and lay people have neither the time nor motivation to become fully knowledgeable in the process. At the same time, property owners can not be expected to accept, on good faith alone, that the values on their assessment notices are automatically correct. The main goal of a public relations program is to provide a level of comfort in the following areas:

- Clearly defined rules of assessment.
- Valuation process founded in logic.
- Competent and objective assessors.
- Additional information readily available for anyone interested in acquiring greater knowledge.

As with any other part of the assessment process, the public relations component requires pre-planning. First, issues and corresponding target audiences must be identified. The second task is to determine the best means to address these issues and to identify any budgetary constraints that may shape the nature of the program. Developing and implementing the program complete the cycle.

Public relations should be viewed as a continuous activity of assessment education and customer feedback. It does not automatically have a one to one relationship with the number of appeals filed. In fact, particularly in its initial years, public relations may create additional appeals by raising the profile of assessments and by informing the public about appeal opportunities. The overall scope of the program must, therefore, be long range. A public that becomes informed, knowledgeable, and aware of the openness of the assessment process will have less and less of a requirement for the appeal system to resolve concerns and frustrations.

2.0 Establishing Objectives

2.1 Identifying the Issues

A public relations program should address issues relevant to its jurisdiction at a given point in time. For reasons of budgetary constraint as well as attracting and maintaining the interest of the program recipients, it is important to focus on issues that are critical to each reassessment.

Some issues are constant and must be a mandatory part of all programs. These include statutory obligations such as, relating the mandate of the assessor, making information available on the new assessed values, and spelling out the manner in which questions can be brought forward, including the official steps of the appeal process. The scale of this part of the program will settle into a pattern over time, but in jurisdictions where public relations activity has been minimal, it may dominate in the first year.

In addition, a public relations program needs to target the topical issues of the day. Topical issues can be jurisdiction-wide in scope, for example, new legislation, or the market impact of a major new industry, or even the introduction of a new computer assisted mass appraisal (CAMA) system. Issues of the day may also be limited in their scope and only affect parts of the jurisdiction or specific property types. In all cases, the design of a public relations program should be cognizant of the current concerns of the property owners and the critical messages to be related.

Issue identification may occur in numerous ways. In many instances, outside forces do the job of bringing the issue to the assessor's attention. Items like new legislation, for example, may change the rules of assessment and these changes should clearly be taken into account in defining the current public relations program.

The assessor should also be pro-active in the identification of issues. In smaller jurisdictions, the assessor should be plugged in to the community to such an extent that the day to day activity of carrying out his or her job constitutes an ongoing survey of interests and concerns. In these jurisdictions, a simple checklist may help ensure that all of the issues are picked up. The checklist might include such questions as the following:

- What are the "hot" assessment issues in the jurisdiction?
- Have these issues been discussed with council and the civic administration?
- What information and explanation will you provide to the taxpayer about these issues? How will you communicate this information?
- What assessment shifts have occurred since the last reassessment?

- Which property types, or locations, have seen shifts of over 5%, 10%?
- Would it be useful to discuss these shifts with the affected taxpayers before the notices are mailed out?
- What information/explanation will be provided to explain the shifts and how will this information be communicated?
- What information will frontline administrative staff require in order to answer the majority of taxpayer questions?
- What aspects of the assessment process need further clarification for taxpayers and other constituents?

In larger jurisdictions, other means may be required to determine the issues. Focus groups are useful in this regard. Focus group sessions are normally prepared by market survey or public relations firms, and comprise one or more sessions of discussion on pre-selected assessment questions. Depending on the time and budget available, the group may be comprised of a cross-section of property owners in the community, or there may be a number of groups, each representative of a certain segment of the community. Groups may be representative of property types, such as homeowners or retailers, or they may be based on other grounds, for example, those with appeal experience and those without.

The primary value of focus groups comes with the analysis of the results of the discussions of the participants. On their own, the focus group discussions are not particularly useful as a public relations instrument. They are low profile and involve only a very small segment of the population. However, they are useful in designing public relations programs since they allow the targeting of specific concerns raised in the sessions. An enhanced sampling of public views is also an option and actual public surveys can be conducted with similar objectives. However, the time requirements and costs of such programs can be prohibitive, and barring special circumstances, they are probably unnecessary.

2.2 Determining Target Audiences

The assessment process serves a varied list of clients. The nature of their interests in assessment matters is equally varied. An efficient and cost-effective public relations program targets its approach and product to meet the needs of each identified audience.

The **municipal councilor** needs information on how assessment changes are going to affect tax rate decisions. Councilors should not be expected to become assessment experts, nor should they attempt to be assessment experts. However, councilors do need to be thoroughly briefed not only on assessment results, but also on the methodologies employed for valuation purposes. It is the councilor who often fields the initial telephone call or inquiry from the taxpayer and a base level of assessment knowledge is necessary. In addition to elected officials, other civic staff need to be informed. These include senior civic administrators as well as staff from partnering departments, for example, Finance.

The **homeowners**' interests relate to understanding the value assigned to their house and how that value compares with other homes in the neighborhood. Similar interests may be shared by farmers who are usually well versed in the relative values of the soil types in their region.

Special interest and lobby groups will also need to be identified prior to designing the public relations program. Some of these may be permanent in nature, for example, the Alberta Hotel Association, whereas others may have banded together out of interest in an issue unique to this point in time. Often these will include the same groups that the assessor has worked with as a liaison committee during preparation of the assessment roll.

Identifying and documenting the target audiences is to some extent a by-product of section 2.1 Identifying the Issues. These objectives will set the stage for designing the public relations program.

2.3 Defining the Purposes of Assessment

A fundamental objective of a public relations program is to provide all interested parties with a basic understanding of the purpose of real property assessment. A concise definition of the mandate of the assessment program should spell out the distinction between assessment and taxation. Emphasis should be placed on the objective nature of the assessor's responsibility to estimate the value of property.

2.4 Defining the Methods of Assessment

Assessment methodologies will be of greater or lesser interest to various segments of the overall target audience. Owners or agents for complex properties will require detailed information. Homeowners may require a basic explanation of mass appraisal, with emphasis on the sales comparative and market-modified replacement cost approaches.

The manner and scope with which the public relations program addresses the question of methodology will be premised on the previously ascertained information regarding the issues to be addressed and the target audiences critical to the current reassessment.

2.5 Information on Assessment Results

Public relations activities around the assessor's mandate and methods are primarily designed to lay out the base line information that the assessing authority wishes to impart to the public. The public's main interest, on the other hand, is to learn of the results of the reassessment. A public relations program that does not meet this public expectation will get little attention from property owners.

Preparation of information will need to be tailored to the interests of each identified target audience. The manner of portraying this information will vary accordingly. Municipal councilors and school authorities will normally benefit from personal presentations, with the emphasis being on how the new assessment will affect tax rates and tax burden distribution among property classes. Property owners will be concerned not only about the new values, but often of even greater importance is, "How does this compare with last year's assessment?" Special interest and lobby groups will need specific information on how the new values affect their members. The means by which this information will be presented to property owners or interest groups will vary widely, based on factors such as the jurisdiction's size, budget, assessment history, or other parameters.

3.0 Target Audiences and Their Interests

3.1 Elected Officials

An axiom of public relations programs is to remember that the assessment process exists for the purpose of allocating taxes. Taxes are established by elected officials, who have a high interest in assessment. Public relations programs must reflect this interest.

Municipal councils and school boards consist of the elected officials who are closest to the electorate. Their interests are likely to be at two levels. As members of the council or school board, they will need to know what is happening to assessment values in their jurisdiction. Trends in value for the entire municipality will be important, as will any shifts in relative value between property classes. Individual elected officials will also have an interest in how reassessment is affecting their constituents. Areas that are viewed as hot spots by the assessor will be of similar interest to the council or school board members representing those areas.

In addition to satisfying their interest in assessed values, it is incumbent on the assessor to provide information to the elected officials on the assessor's mandate and process. If officials are to properly convey information to the electorate and their expectations of the assessor are to be realistic, the assessor's public relations program must provide for education on the entire range of assessment activities, not just the results.

3.2 Homeowners and Farmers

In urban municipalities, homeowners normally own the greatest numbers of property parcels. In rural municipalities, the same can usually be said of farmers. The volume of properties involved in either circumstance dictate that public relations activities be generic in nature. These groups are usually not interested in the technicalities of valuation, but primarily in the results. Equity is a key concern and relationships to sale prices are a widely understood concept. In the latter regard, there is a need to differentiate between sale price and assessed value. “One sale does not a market make.”

The outstanding interest of the homeowner in a new assessment is “taxes”! Part of the public relations task, therefore, becomes educating the homeowner as to the differences between these two pieces of the same puzzle.

3.3 Owners of Commercial and Industrial Properties

Public relations programs for owners of commercial and industrial properties have some advantages over those for owners of homes and farms. In the first place, there are far fewer of these properties, so the program can often deal one on one with the owners. Secondly, the owners themselves, or their agents, are often already knowledgeable about how the market value of this type of property is determined. Information and discussion can then occur with the knowledge that the audience is informed.

Although the number of commercial and industrial properties may be small, the assessed value of these properties can often be very high. Therefore, a successful public relations program in relation to commercial and industrial properties can often have a more dramatic impact on producing a stable assessment roll, than the public relations program directed to homeowners.

3.4 Special Interest and Lobby Groups

Lobby groups may be either permanent in nature or short term creations to address a current concern. If these concerns are identified in advance, the public relations program can be designed to accommodate the issues.

The scope of issue that can foster a special interest or lobby group is extensive. It can be residential-oriented, industry-oriented, extremely local, or province-wide in nature. The question of what authority is responsible, or best suited, to address the issue must be addressed first. The nature of the response can then be determined.

Long-range programs can be put in place for groups whose interests are likely to be permanent in nature, for example, a cottage owners' association. In these circumstances, the public relations activity may be more structurally focussed, for example, establishing liaison committees. Short-term issues, for example, the impact on property values of a new group home in the neighborhood, will require a different public relations program approach and design. Budgetary considerations will have a less significant role to play in these decisions, since staff time is a key element and, therefore, external costs are minimized.

4.0 Components of a Public Relations Program

4.1 Assessment's Role in Real Property Taxation

One of the constants that needs to be addressed in assessment public information programs is the relationship and the distinction between assessments and taxes. With ongoing programs, it may not be necessary to dwell on this issue each year, but ongoing reminders remain a mandatory component.

The whole concept of *ad valorem* taxation remains a confusing subject to most property owners and in some cases to elected officials. Virtually by default, the onus has traditionally fallen on the assessor to be the educator on this subject. Assessor certification programs should contain course material that ensures the assessor is up to the task.

Emphasis on material developed for explaining the *ad valorem* system should distinguish between the neutrality of the valuation part of the process as compared to the policy-driven tax decisions. Reference to the assessor's education program and code of ethics can reinforce this distinction.

For municipal councils, school boards, and even members of the provincial legislature, periodic seminars should be made available by the appropriate assessing agency to explain how the *ad valorem* system works. An appropriate time for such presentations is shortly after elections, so that newly elected officials may be educated and their associates may have a refresher course.

Similar information should form part of the public relations program to the general public. In designing this element of the program, it must be recognized that although understanding the distinction between assessment and taxes is useful, it is also not high on the average property owner's priority list! Overkill should be avoided.

4.2 Assessment Methodologies

The Municipal Government Act provides in section 299 that:

> *An assessed person can request sufficient information from a municipality to see how the assessor prepared the assessment of that person's property.*

Although the statutory reference adds weight to the subject, the assessor should always have, as part of his/her mandate, a program to inform the property owners on the methods by which these assessments are derived. The statutory requirement for "sufficient information" should easily be achieved by even a modest information program by the assessor.

Reassessment Book

One of the simplest ways to address the subject of methodologies is a reassessment book that, in addition to noting the statutory requirements, summarizes the principal valuation methods applied to each type of property. A loose-leaf version is desirable, so that a chapter on single-family homes, for instance, may be copied and distributed individually as necessary.

The scale of the book will vary with the size of the jurisdiction. Its scope however should be fairly constant in terms of the subject matter covered. A synopsis view of a sample table of contents follows:

I. Assessment Law in Alberta

   - Valuation principles and instruction to the assessor

II. Description of the Assessment Process

- Mass appraisal vs. single property appraisal
- Accepted valuation methods; cost, income, comparable sales

III. Valuation Methods By Property Type

A. Land

1. Parcel statistics by type
2. Sales statistics by type
3. Sales analysis

B. Commercial Properties

1. General Approach to Valuation
2. Data Sources (sales, income/expense data)
3. Commercial Properties by Sub-type

a) Hotels

b) Office Buildings

c) Etc.

C. Residential Properties

1. General Approach
2. Data Sources (physical inspection program, sales)
3. Residential Properties by Sub-type

a) Single Family Dwellings

- general comments (e.g. age, quality)
- methodology (sales analysis, neighborhoods, adjustment factors, etc.)

b) High-Rise Apartments

c) Etc.

IV. Assessment Quality Control Processes

- Typical measurement standards (IAAO)

- Sales verification procedures

V. Quality of Current Reassessment

- Portrayal of results of current reassessment

The reassessment book serves a number of audiences and purposes:

a) It is a useful, and occasionally educational, exercise for the staff of the assessor's office to concisely document their methods.

b) It is an essential teaching tool in presentations to elected officials and where opportunity presents itself, to appeal tribunals prior to the delivery of the roll.

c) Its availability to the taxpayer is of invaluable assistance in demystifying the assessment process and demonstrating that there are no secrets.

The book need not be a detailed instructional manual. Its purpose is to provide a summary view, frequently to a lay audience, of the overall function of the assessor's office and more specifically, how values were determined for a given group of similar properties.

Although the book may, in the first instance, represent a significant investment of the assessor's time in drafting the document, its contents generally require little updating and it should remain valid for a number of years. The book speaks to methodologies, as opposed to actual values.

The reassessment book, or alternatively a series of individual papers by property type, should be available in the assessor's office for any interested party. Part of its appeal is not so much that property owners will consume vast quantities, it is the simple fact that such a document is available and that assessment methods are documented for all to see. Copies of the book should also form part of the material presented to individual councilors and elected officials as part of their education sessions. The appropriate individual chapters are also useful for distribution to commercial/industrial or other special interest groups with whom the assessor's office is in contact.

4.3 Depicting Assessment Results

It should not be surprising that most property owners are not so much concerned with the assessment process as they are with the results. A public relations program must, in some fashion, depict the assessed values to the target audiences.

In small jurisdictions, it may be possible to print the assessed values, old and new, of each and every property in the local newspaper. Such an approach has some significant benefit, in that it not only provides the sought after information, it also reinforces the message that property assessment is an open process and the municipality has no secrets to hide.

In larger jurisdictions the sheer volume of properties limits the feasibility of simply listing the results publicly, other than in the assessment roll itself. Similarly, the greater variety of property types and the accompanying variation in owners' interest and knowledge levels, dictate that a more selective process be adopted.

Assessment Preview Programs

Adoption by the assessor of a **preview period** can be of value in a public relations program, as well as for its primary purpose of helping refine the final assessed values.

Preview periods are premised upon an early release of a draft assessment roll. The format of the draft roll may be as simple as a side-by-side listing of the old and new assessments. Opportunity is then provided to the property owner, over this period, to review the draft assessment in more detail and talk if need be with the assessor. The preview period is very useful for picking up property-specific errors. Systemic errors are picked up earlier in the process, during the pre-valuation consultative stage. Since the roll is not official yet, the assessor, in turn, has the opportunity to make immediate changes to a proposed assessment if errors are found or if new information is brought forward that warrants such change. The process is informal and non-adversarial. Its intent is to explain the draft value and to pre-empt the need for formal appeal to enact changes.

A number of factors may influence the exact scope and duration of the preview period. These include:

- Statutory deadlines for valuation (July 1), and state and condition of the property (December 31), as well as the statutory deadlines for reassessment, issuance of notices, and certification of the roll. It may, in fact, prove desirable to seek amendments to some of these provisions if the timelines are too compressed.
- The technology available to the assessor. Easily accessed computer databases are essential in large jurisdictions if the program is to address all properties (passwords

can protect confidential data). Similarly the availability of call centre technology is a valuable asset for large-scale programs.

- The assessing jurisdiction must be able to assign, or temporarily acquire, staff resources adequate to respond to public enquiries. Promoting a program that cannot live up to the expectations created can be disastrous.
- The degree of anticipated change in assessed values may dictate whether a preview program is worthwhile on an overall basis, or perhaps whether it can be limited to certain property types or sub-areas within the jurisdiction.
- The nature of the preview program will appropriately vary with the differing property types that exist in the municipality.

Preview programs have an obvious benefit as a public relations instrument. They are the ultimate in terms of letting each and every property owner receive his or her own personal briefing on any aspect of the assessment process. Details of a preview program will vary by property type. A residential preview program for a large jurisdiction might include a pre-release publicity campaign, establishment of a customer reception centre, an assessment information telephone hot line, and the development of a computer website.

With commercial and industrial properties, the circumstances differ somewhat. From a valuation viewpoint, preview programs are even more valuable for these properties than they are for single-family homes. The complexities in valuing the commercial/industrial properties are such that the dialogue opportunity offered by the preview program can significantly assist in deriving more accurate final assessed values. From a public relations perspective, on the other hand, the benefits from the residential program are probably more significant since they affect a greater number of individuals.

Overall, preview programs are a vehicle that can assist in stressing one of the assessor's most recurrent public relations themes, that is, "assessment is an open process and we are pleased to share both our methods and our results."

The requirement for annual reassessments places obvious time restrictions on employing preview programs. Their merits, however, are such that assessment schedules should be designed to incorporate some version of these programs into the ongoing assessment cycle.

Public Relations Programs for Local Officials

There are other parties whose need for information on assessment results will not be addressed through single-property oriented activities like preview programs. Local and provincial authorities will need to have summary reassessment results compiled for purposes of tax impact analysis and ongoing legislative review, respectively. Summary material can normally be prepared in advance of the assessment roll being finalized. This information should be presented to the elected officials at the earliest possible date. Advance notice of potentially negative impacts is essential to the elected official.

Public Relations Programs and Media Exposure

Another client of the public relations program will be the media. Summary views of assessment results should be prepared in a media-friendly fashion suitable for publication in newspapers, television clips, etc. Background briefings of media personnel by skilled and articulate line staff before the release of reassessment information serve to enhance understanding, ensure more accurate interpretation, and reinforce the “open process-no secrets” theme.

Programs on Assessment Results

In designing the results portion of the public relations program, reference should be made to the earlier discussions regarding identification of issues and target audiences. Results should be available in an appropriate form to meet these pre-identified objectives. Information for a lobby group representing personal care homes, for example, is likely best produced in a graphic format suitable for personal presentation, as it is likely that this will be the means of conveying the results to such a group. Results for elected officials on the other hand, may benefit from statistical tables designed to answer the questions of tax impacts and shifts, noted earlier, when this target group was first identified.

4.4 Feedback Mechanisms

Public relations mirror the valuation process, in that the results should be monitored to ensure that the product gets better with each iteration. It must be emphasized that public relations are not a one-time endeavor. It is a permanent part of the assessor’s responsibility. The scale and content of the program will intentionally vary from year to year, but this variation should be part of a conscious plan and not just reflective of bursts of enthusiasm or, even worse, a knee-jerk reaction to crisis.

Feedback mechanisms are an essential part of the public relations plan. In some cases, the results are directly observable by the assessor. Ongoing and regular contact with elected officials, for instance, allows the assessor ample opportunity to witness the extent to which this target audience has positively received the various elements of the program.

The assessor's office can also contribute to the feedback program. For example, volumes and types of telephone inquiries should be recorded in a logbook. Appeal volumes should be tracked, as well as success rates. In smaller jurisdictions, the assessor's office can personally note or copy media commentary for year to year comparison. In larger jurisdictions, media-tracking companies provide such a service for a cost.

It should be possible to receive similar focussed feedback from the owners of major properties. The assessor’s ongoing liaison with these individuals, or their representative organizations, provides ample opportunity to receive their views and to observe the effectiveness of the program.

One on one feedback is not a realistic mechanism for those parts of the program directed at the larger numbers of homeowners, or the farm community in rural jurisdictions. In these cases, it is useful to periodically survey the owners to determine not only if the delivery mechanism is performing adequately but also if the message itself is being understood. The style of survey is another of those items that will vary with the size of the jurisdiction. In rural jurisdictions, the survey may be informal and might consist of mail-back questionnaires inserted in the weekly newspapers or a survey questionnaire inserted with a sampling of the assessment notices. Feedback from councilors on concerns expressed by their constituents is another useful source. In larger urban centres, it is useful to occasionally seek professional assistance in designing a survey and analyzing its results. This information is helpful in designing next year’s public relation’s program. The results may also become an element in future programs, for example, as a running measure of satisfaction with the assessment process.

5.0 Public Relations Tools

5.1 Jurisdictional Responsibility

Both the provincial and local authorities have legitimate roles to play in designing and implementing public relations programs. The dividing line reflects their designated areas of responsibility. As the senior level of government, the Province establishes the legislation and regulations that govern the conduct of the assessment program. Local authorities are responsible for implementing the assessment programs and do so through their chosen assessment staff or agencies.

The Province’s role in assessment public relations is, by its nature, high level. It is responsible for explaining the content of the legislation and the regulations. It can do so by issuing its own public relations products or it can do so in concert with the local authorities, by providing background information to be incorporated in some fashion into the local program.

Municipalities have the responsibility, normally delegated to their assessors, to explain the more direct activities associated with the assessment process and the corresponding connections to the tax system. Since these are areas for which property owners hold municipal government responsible, it is natural that this level of government takes the lead role in public relations programs.

5.2 Selection of Media Tools and Role of the Assessor

There are innumerable methods and tools available with which to deliver public relations programs. Each has it own strengths and weaknesses and each must be examined as to what it brings to the current issues and target audiences identified by the assessor.

Choice of delivery mechanisms is tied closely to the current issues and target audiences to be addressed. Some tools, for reasons of cost or efficiency, are normally more suited to either rural or urban circumstances as the case may be. Exclusivity is never absolute, however. It may be that an issue is so dominant or controversial in a rural area at a specific point in time that the expense of a higher-cost media campaign is worth the one-time expense. Conversely, in a large urban centre, if a reassessment is predicted to universally demonstrate minimal change in assessed values, it may be prudent to limit mass-produced elements to inserts with the notices of assessment and singular advertorials in the daily papers, akin to what might normally be utilized exclusively in rural weeklies.

For some of the reasons mentioned above, it is clear that decisions as to the choice of public relations mechanisms to be employed must be made up front and annually. Once these choices are made, action plans can be prepared regarding program delivery.

The following commentary is offered on several of the more popular public relations tools available:

a) Assessor - The assessor is the single most useful conveyor of the public relations message. Contact with elected officials and with owners of major properties should be almost exclusively reserved for the assessor's personal involvement. Where face to face conversations are feasible, they are nearly always superior to alternatives, such as print material. Training for the assessors in the appropriate communication skills can be a wise investment for an assessing jurisdiction.

b) Public notices - It is required from time to time to provide notice of certain events or deadlines related to the assessment process. Such public notices should be brief and totally factual. They are meant to be news, not educational material.

c) Brochures/fact sheets – This is one of the most traditional, economic, and effective means of presenting a brief version of the assessor's message. Brochures and fact sheets are versatile and can be designed to be eye-catching and easy to read. The principal limitation is their brevity, which does not allow adequate treatment of more complex matters.

d) Advertorials/prepared copy – Advertorials represent a cross between a newspaper article and an advertisement. They are written by the assessor and can present reasonable detail on the subject to be addressed. They are placed in newspapers in similar fashion and cost to placing an ad. Prepared copy is a version of an advertorial. It is written by the assessor, but is inserted as a public service message free of charge in newspapers. Prepared copy is more likely to be accepted in weekly or special interest group newspapers.

e) Assessment special editions – Assessment agencies can prepare their own mini-newspapers that can accompany the daily papers as a special weekend supplement. The advantage of the special edition is that its size allows more detailed discussion of several different assessment topics. Also, the ability to incorporate pictures and graphics enhances its readability. Cost is the obvious constraint to such a document and it is also necessary to ensure that it is not overly slick.

f) Inserts – Special inserts mentioning key assessment facts, for example, telephone numbers to call, may be designed to accompany utility bills, municipal mailings, and most commonly the actual assessment notices. They cost little to produce and can introduce or reinforce important points. Space limitations are a drawback.

g) Public meetings – A favorite traditional tool of the assessor is a public meeting to present a variety of material, for example, methodologies, results, legislative guidelines, etc. Although generally affordable and of some value in rural areas, such meetings have significant risks associated with them. Attendance is unpredictable, controlling the meetings can be difficult, and there is often conflict between what the assessor wishes to talk about and what the public wants to hear. Public meetings can become an exercise in negative public relations. When a public meeting is deemed desirable, an independent and skilled moderator is a necessity.

h) Information kiosks – Staffed or self-serve information kiosks can be a valuable means of disseminating information in a non-adversarial environment. The information booths, or kiosks, may be high-tech and totally automated or can be staffed by assessment officers who deal individually with the interested public. Locations are chosen for their accessibility and high traffic volumes, for example, common areas of regional shopping centres. Costs are reasonable and the property owner often donates free space. Information kiosks are most suited to urban environments and often require shift work by trained staff. However, they can be costly if overtime rates come into play.

i) Customer reception centre – A single site can be developed at the assessor's office, or the municipal hall, as the focal point for face to face public relations activities. Public access personal computers can be part of the program at the central site and databases may be developed specifically for this purpose. In less automated jurisdictions, success can still be obtained with paper copies and the availability of trained staff. Some costs may be involved in configuring offices for this purpose or in providing support technology. Extended hours are also desirable.

j) Call centres – Numerous companies now exist that can provide short term phone banks staffed by their own employees. This can provide valuable assistance to assessment public relations programs. Company staff are given prepared lists of commonly asked questions and the appropriate answers. Callback provisions exist in those instances where assessment personnel must become involved. Call centres are an appropriate consideration for large urban centres where large volumes of residential enquiries may be expected. They can be quite cost effective and also serve to promote the openness of the assessment process.

k) Audio-text – An alternative to the more costly call centre option is the use of audio-text. These automatic answering services provide assistance by offering pre-recorded questions and answers to common assessment issues through a bank of telephones. By keying onto their dial pad, the caller selects "the language of his/her choice", the nature of the question, etc. These systems are versatile and keep staff resources free for other duties.

l) Radio – A number of opportunities exist through radio to disseminate the assessment message. Radio can provide public notices, often at no cost; more extensive commercials can be developed, at significant cost; and appearances on open-line call-in shows can be arranged. Surveys have shown that people are more apt to pick up information for purposes like assessment on radio than they are on TV. Costs can be prohibitive, however, and there are always risks associated with open-line shows.

m) Television – One of the more cost-effective tools for disseminating assessment information is the use of public access cable TV. These channels usually make time available free of charge for public service programs. Interviews with the assessor can be run that provide direct information about the issues deemed to be most critical. Regular commercial TV is also available as a medium and it too may be useful for public service messages or short commercial notices. However, costs are usually a prohibitive item with TV commercials.

n) Websites – Many assessment jurisdictions are now developing their own websites. Content can include legislation, methodology summaries, and even the assessment rolls. Reference is made to the International Association of Assessing Officers (IAAO) website, the British Columbia Assessment Authority website and the award winning website of the City of Milwaukee's Assessment Department. This tool will definitely gain in popularity over the next several years. Start-up costs need not be high, particularly if there are computer literate staff who may develop the website in-house. Maintenance can be an issue, however, since it is necessary to keep any information on the site current. There is also no evidence to suggest what percentage of the population is likely to access this communication medium.

As can be seen, there are a number of methods available to deliver public relations programs. Careful planning will ensure that the delivery mechanism chosen is appropriately matched with the issues before the assessor and the budget available.

6.0 Conclusions

Public relations are as much a part of the assessor’s job as is the valuation of property. In the same way that valuation activities must be planned and matched to the jurisdiction’s needs and resources, so must the public relations function.

Pragmatism must be paramount in designing a public relations program. It should always address the statutory considerations, but the balance of the message should be tailored to what the research has determined to be the issues of the day. Costs are always a determining factor and delivery mechanisms should be chosen that are best suited to delivering the proper message to the proper audience at the least possible expense. When properly designed and executed, public relations programs can be one of the assessor’s best allies. Poorly planned and executed, they can do more harm than good and waste staff and dollar resources.