Reviewing CREA's new web maps

By Gary Little

On July 2, CREA released an interactive map showing the locations of over a quarter million properties in the Canadian MLS database. See www.realtor.ca. It's an important – though imperfect – first step towards allowing buyers to efficiently locate properties of interest by displaying them geographically rather than in long, tedious lists.

No other real estate mapping service in Canada matches the completeness of CREA's map. Those at century21.ca and remax.ca include only listings from their own franchisees, so are not too useful for buyers who generally prefer to see everything available for sale in an area. A regional map such as my own Sunshine Coast map at map.GaryLittle.ca does include all properties for sale, but only those within a specific geographic area.

Using CREA's new map is fairly easy. When it first comes up, the map is in the centre with search criteria selection controls on the left and a sidebar on the right that contains a list of properties that satisfy the current search criteria. There are also controls on the map for panning and zooming. I found the Location box above the map quite convenient for quickly panning to a location of interest by specifying a postal address or just a postal code. A nice feature is the ability to save searches (including the map position and zoom level) so that you can repeat the same search later by picking its name from a list. (Inexplicably, the searches are saved for only 30 days, too short a time for most buyers these days.)

When the map first starts up, you will need to zoom in until fewer than 500 properties are found within the geographic bounds of the map. Rolling the mouse over a property icon causes an information balloon to appear, which includes a thumbnail photo and a bare-bones summary of the property. To see a full data sheet for the property, you click the More Information link in the balloon.

One shortcoming I noticed right away is that the information balloon does not include the street address of the property. To discover it, you have to click the More Information link, then hunt for the address buried on the data sheet in fine print. Conversely, the MLS number is prominently displayed in the balloon. Feedback to CREA: clients couldn't care less about the MLS number, but they definitely want to see the address.

CREA's map includes an aerial photo view but I found the resolution of the photos to be very poor, especially in rural areas, when compared to the photos used with mapping solutions based on Google Maps technology. (CREA's map is based on Microsoft's Visual Earth technology.) For example, in my service area, CREA's aerial photos are not clear enough to see individual houses; with Google Maps I can zoom in very close and see cars on the street and rooftops.

A huge problem that CREA needs to solve quickly is the often atrocious placement of properties on the map, especially in rural areas. CREA uses a software geocoder to convert street addresses to geographic coordinates (latitude, longitude). Geocoders typically return an accuracy code to indicate how well the conversion went. Any property whose address cannot be determined at a resolution of street corner or better simply should not be included on the map: I would prefer using an incomplete map with well-placed properties than one strewn with lost souls. Mapping of land-only listings is really bad because most of these listings don't have a conventional street address for the geocoder to work with and the

map becomes just as confused as the geocoder. The best solution to the problem is for individual listing agents to provide coordinates directly to their real estate boards.

My loudest complaint about CREA's map is the abysmal support for people who don't happen to use Internet Explorer and Windows. CREA doesn't mention system requirements anywhere but, hey, this is a public website, it should just work regardless of browser or OS, right? Not quite. When using Firefox 3 or Safari on Windows or Mac OS X, I noticed the zoom slider was either missing or mostly covered by the map, the panning control didn't work at all, and the Location box was missing entirely. On occasion, property icons did not appear on the map. The worst flaw occurred when running Safari on Windows: the map did not appear at all!

In closing, I have some pointed advice for my fellow sales reps as well as for CREA to ensure the interactive mapping experience for buyers and sellers of Canadian real estate is enjoyable and productive. First, to the sales reps: verify that all your listings are properly positioned on the map; if they're not, provide correct coordinates to your board immediately.

Next, to CREA: modify the map so it works flawlessly with the Firefox and Safari browsers on both Windows and Mac OS X. More than 20 per cent of the public is now using Firefox and although Mac OS X has only about a five per cent market share, it is – as the late Douglas Adams once famously said – the top five per cent. And don't forget that Safari is the browser inside those incredibly popular Apple gadgets, the iPod Touch and the iPhone. We want all these people to be browsing the map and buying property, don't we?

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