

THE GUEST COLUMN



By Gary Little

An annual check-up for the maps on Realtor.ca

CREA's Realtor.ca interactive real estate map was a preemie, born a year ago on July 2, 2008, about six months before it should have seen the light of day. As a result, it suffered from a number of birth defects, most of which I chronicled here in the pages of REM in August 2008.

The most serious problem was that prospective home buyers were unable to embrace CREA's baby unless they happened to be using Internet Explorer on Windows or an old version of the Firefox browser. This meant that about one in four people, perhaps many more, were very disappointed.

I have good news to report: thanks to some excellent work by some software surgeons, many of the early defects have now been corrected and the patient is expected to have a long life. However, there are still several blemishes that need prompt attention, some genetic (which may be difficult or expensive to fix) and others environmental (which can be fixed more easily).

The map's genetic defects derive from flaws in its parents (CREA and its member real estate boards) and its grandparents (Microsoft and its licensees). Their commitment to make fundamental lifestyle changes could overcome these flaws but, inevitably, the occasional intervention by concerned friends (we agents) will be necessary to ensure continued good health.

A long-standing CREA flaw has been its apparent assumption that everyone in the general public has a computer running



The best aerial photography available for Nanaimo, B.C. on Bing (left) and Google (above). That's the roof of the Nanaimo Bastion on Google. Good luck finding it on Bing.

Windows and Internet Explorer. CREA rarely seems to make an effort to support anything else, particularly other important operating systems. (I just checked the statistics for my own website and 28 per cent of the visitors are running the Macintosh OS. This is an OS that CREA still says it does not support!) This just doesn't cut it when adoption of Internet standards makes it easy for web-based software to work with virtually any modern OS and browser. CREA's decision last year to release a Realtor.ca map that

shut out huge numbers of potential buyers was unforgivable.

The good news is that CREA finally seems to have changed its attitude – no doubt the result of the several thousand complaints it likely received when the map was born. The map now works very well with the latest versions of the most popular browsers: Internet Explorer (Windows), Firefox (Windows and Mac), Google Chrome (Windows), and Safari (Windows and Mac). The Location box and zoom slider still drift out of position on some of these browsers and the "Save

Search" feature is inexplicably missing when using Safari, but the basic capabilities of the map work as advertised. Users of the Opera browser, very popular in Europe, aren't so lucky because the Location box and zoom slider are both missing, making it awkward to navigate the map.

Let's now take a close look at the grandparents. They are Microsoft, which provides CREA with the interactive map infrastructure called Bing Maps (formerly called Virtual Earth), and a handful of Microsoft's data suppliers who provide the road

maps and aerial photography.

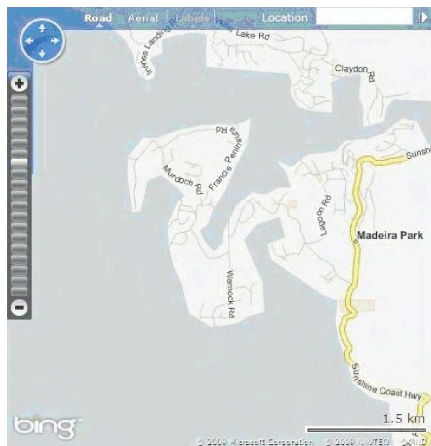
Microsoft's biggest competitor in the interactive map business is Google, which has created the popular Google Maps service. Bing Maps and Google Maps are quite similar in concept and functionality but, as we will see, the quality of the geographic data they present is quite different.

Let's begin by looking at the quality of Bing's aerial photography. What we need in a useful real estate map is the ability to examine photographs of a property so that we can discern the positions of homes and outbuildings, especially relative to neighbouring properties. I hate to embarrass the largest software company on the planet, so I won't use the word that best describes its aerial photography, but it begins with "s-t" and ends with "i-n-k-s".

I'm exaggerating, of course. The aerial photography is excellent for the biggest cities in Canada. But anyone looking for homes in such backwaters as Saskatoon, Nanaimo, Thunder Bay, Lunenburg, Moose Jaw or Red Deer will be very disappointed. The resolution is so bad that it is not possible to identify individual homes.

The aerial photography used in Google Maps is far superior for these towns (the resolution is often more than 100 times better) as well as for many other towns in Canada. I have yet to find an example where the Google photography is worse than the corresponding Bing photography. Someone at CREA needs to insist that Microsoft licence better aerial photography for Canada... or else.

The Bing road maps are certainly in better shape than the aerial photography and are similar in quality to the road maps available on Google Maps. Both suffer from infrequent updates,



Shoreline resolution in a rural area (Madeira Park, B.C.): Bing (left) and Google (right). The Google depiction reflects reality.

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GREEN REAL ESTATE



By Elden Freeman

With environmental concerns at the forefront of the news agenda, businesses are taking notice of the opportunity that today's consumer mindset presents. As divided American legislators wrestle over the landmark Waxman-Markey bill, the writing is on the wall that the market is interested in goods and services that facilitate a more ecological lifestyle. The public relations arms of many companies have noticed the trend, and not always to great effect.

The dangers of greenwashing

Corporate response to widespread environmental awareness ranges from the positive and transparent to the unfortunate and deceptive. Some companies have responded well and have been rewarded, as in the case of the success of hybrid vehicles. Even Caterpillar has developed a hybrid diesel-electric bulldozer.

But in all fields, there are organizations more interested in marketing themselves than addressing the issue. The term "greenwashing" was coined to describe the disingenuous activities of companies and organizations that pursue activities that supposedly benefit the environment but in reality are only public relations exercises without any substantial environmental benefit, or whose benefits are vague and misleading at best.

Recently controversy has erupted in the United States over which foods can be classified as "organic", and accusa-

tions of greenwashing have been thrown around accordingly.

Certifying organizations are subject to their own pressures, and so knowing which authorities to trust can be confusing. At first glance, a lot of businesses may seem to be quite environmentally friendly, with certifications from green-sounding organizations, some which the average consumer may see quite often. The truth is that some certifying organizations are simply business-affiliated groups or lobby organizations with minimal if any certification standards. Or, sometimes certification logos of groups like EnergyStar are used without permission.

Not all greenwashing is on purpose. There are some organizations that, while well-meaning, lack the knowledge and preparedness required to fully tackle the considerable task of reducing their environmental

impact. So some bottled water companies advertise how they have reduced paper labels on their products, as opposed to evaluating the production, materials sourcing, transportation, and disposal of their product. Realizing authentic improvements requires considering all parts of the manufacturing process, and the entire life-cycle of a product. The organizations that make a difference are those that have been diligent in their study of environmental issues, and possess the all-around knowledge to offer strong solutions that aren't just public relations Band-Aids.

The National Association of Green Agents and Brokers provides real estate professionals in Canada with the best tools to improve their real estate practice. It provides training and educational resources to help practitioners identify environmentally friendly homes, and to

see how buyers and sellers can enhance property values and reduce costs by making homes more energy efficient. It also certifies real estate organizations through its corporate green real estate leaders program, identifying organizations that adopt green practices in their day-to-day business operation to reduce energy consumption and waste. As well, it has partnered with home inspection leaders AmeriSpec, the nonprofit Earth Day Canada, and the Ontario provincial government to deliver programs, information, and services to real estate professionals. NAGAB's certification is backed up by thorough research and the best environmental practices in use in the real estate business.

Identifying genuine green organizations and learning about the services and information they offer give both businesses and private individuals a leg up on coming changes that will affect business operations and personal lives in the near future. The Waxman-Markey bill is part of a historical trend along with previous agreements like the Kyoto Accord, and both likely represent just a taste of changes to come. In time, it is probable that institutions like governmental regulators, insurers, and all manner of business will codify in policy what is now a top concern for consumers. Organizations like NAGAB offer genuine and useful tools for meeting challenges in the more ecologically sensitive marketplace, and to excel in it.

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Guest Column

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however, so don't expect to see new subdivisions show up anytime soon. The biggest problem with Bing seems to be the atrocious low-resolution depiction of shorelines in rural areas, often making them look quite distorted. Google has its own difficulties: its maps often fail to apply a blue colour to lakes and major rivers — on a large-scale map of Castlegar, B.C., for example, the mighty Columbia River passing through town is mysteriously missing.

A no-brainer requirement for any map is that towns and other landmarks be accurately positioned. If they're not, the map is useless. CREA uses a complex address-to-co-ordinate conversion database to automate the placement of properties for sale, but the results are often unacceptable since the

database often returns only rough estimates, particularly in rural areas. It also cannot handle vacant lots that do not yet have a conventional street address. My rule of thumb is that properties need to be plotted on the correct street within 50 metres of their actual location for a real estate map to be useful.

A few weeks ago an excited young couple rushed into our office, saying they had just spotted on Realtor.ca a home on 2nd Street for a very low price. "We have to see it now!" they exclaimed. After a little due diligence, we determined that the house was on 2nd Street all right, but the one located several hundred km away on Malcolm Island, off the northeast coast of Vancouver Island. The couple was very disappointed. This is the type of error we need to eliminate before the public will have complete confidence in

using the Realtor.ca map.

We can fix positioning problems once and for all by making a simple change to our work environment: whenever we take a listing, we also determine the geographic co-ordinates of the property and supply them to the board. It's so easy, but few of us seem to do it.

I suggested to my local board that it require all agents to provide co-ordinates when they send in listing details. I was met with surprising resistance: "We're concerned about putting more requirements on agents." All I can do is shake my head in dismay — the location of a property is its most important attribute, especially now that CREA has made the Realtor.ca map the primary tool for searching for property in Canada. Why the specious concern for the agent — shouldn't client satisfaction be the No. 1 priority?

So, Dr. Gary's Rx for CREA

is: (1) iron out the last few browser wrinkles; (2) insist that Microsoft provide better aerial photography and road maps — or switch to a Google Maps solution if they don't; and (3) have every board in Canada insist that agents provide geographic co-ordinates with their listing data. This prescription will ensure that our cartographic baby will grow up to become a healthy, productive adult.

Okay, it's time for me to wrap up. I have to check out a hot \$500,000 waterfront property in West Vancouver that I've just spotted on the map. At least I think it's on the waterfront... and I think it's in West Van!

Gary Little is a sales rep for Royal LePage Sunshine Coast in Sechelt, B.C. He is well-known for his interactive maps of the area — real estate for sale, waterfalls and exploration. Find out more about him at www.GaryLittle.ca. ■ REM