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June 12, 2001

Mr. Robert A. Richards  
President and Chief Administrative Officer  
Ontario Property Assessment Corporation  
1305 Pickering Parkway  
Pickering, Ontario L1V 3P2

Dear Mr. Richards:

I am very concerned about your changes to the Ontario Property Assessment Corporation outlined in your letter of May 28, 2001. While I acknowledge that a goal of improved service is always a worthy one, your Futures Implementation plan, released May 24<sup>th</sup>, will not result in better service to the public.

In effect, your plan to consolidate operations in the Toronto area will provide less service to the very people you are mandated to serve. By establishing a central call centre and downsizing community offices eventually out of existence, your vision does a disservice to citizens in all other parts of the province from Kenora to Windsor. Ratepayers are already complaining that they have trouble getting through to OPAC staff. With a centralized call centre they are less likely to get someone who knows their local situation or can go beyond a standard response.

What this plan has achieved to date is a massive destabilization of your employees and their collective agreement through an unwise centralization in the very personal business of property tax assessment.

It puts many OPAC workers at risk of lower wages or no employment at all. Among the 1,400 workers you surprised when ordering them to reapply for their jobs (an undisclosed number of as-yet defined positions) are many who are beset with uncertainty, worry and concern over OPAC's new direction.

Call centres are notorious for dragging down wages and benefits, lowering levels of service and destroying continuity. Ultimately, this plan is about cutting staff and cutting costs. Service to the general public will suffer.

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Before you take one of North America's most respected assessment organizations and impose severe limitations on its ability to function, consider the consequences of throwing it into disarray:

- Layoffs and lower wages
- Loss of staff expertise, experience, continuity and institutional knowledge
- Retraining complexities
- Major reassessment due in 18 months
- Staff reductions – too few people to do a proper job
- Assessment services made more remote
- Call centre reputation with customers as 'voice mail jail'
- Over reliance on technology at expense of human approach

With municipalities mandated by the province to pay for and provide assessment services, your job is to ensure that OPAC responds with measured changes that sacrifice neither public employees nor the excellent service they provide to citizens across the province.

The Conservative government's Beaubien Report has already infringed on your agency's arm's length role by ordering OPAC to allow golf course property owners in the Greater Toronto Area to pay significantly less than the market value your assessors placed on these lucrative lands.

It seems to me that a government that pushes tax breaks for wealthy golf course owners while municipalities stagger under the weight of added costs they pass on in higher taxes to property taxpayers is not one we should be following.

Throwing a bunch of qualified people out of work and creating upheaval in an assessment office that has worked reasonably well overall is asking for trouble down the road.

I request that you work with your board and union to devise a better plan that protects jobs and makes full use of staff's skills to provide better service to all your stakeholders. I would appreciate your response to the points I've raised.

Yours truly,

(Original Signed by Mr. Hampton)

Howard Hampton, Leader  
Ontario New Democratic Party