

September 9, 2021

Council for the Municipality of West Nipissing
c/o Melanie Ducharme, Municipal Clerk / Planner
225 Holditch Street, Suite 101
Sturgeon Falls, ON
P2B 1T1

Dear Council for the Municipality of West Nipissing:

Re: Closed meeting complaint

My Office received complaints about a closed meeting held by council for the Municipality of West Nipissing (the "Municipality") on May 12, 2021. The complaints alleged that one of the topics discussed by council did not fit within the cited exception under the *Municipal Act, 2001* (the "Act").

I am writing to share the outcome of my Office's review.

Ombudsman jurisdiction

As of January 1, 2008, the Act gives anyone the right to request an investigation into whether a municipality has complied with the Act in closing a meeting to the public. Municipalities may appoint their own investigator. The Act designates the Ombudsman as the default investigator for municipalities that have not appointed their own. My Office is the closed meeting investigator for the Municipality of West Nipissing.

In reviewing closed meeting complaints, we consider whether the open meeting requirements of the Act and the municipality's governing procedures have been observed.

My Office has investigated hundreds of closed meetings since 2008. To assist municipal councils, staff, and the public, we have developed an online digest of open meeting cases. This searchable repository was created to provide easy access to the Ombudsman's decisions on, and interpretations of, the open meeting rules. Council members and staff can consult the digest to inform their discussions and decisions on whether certain matters can or should be discussed in closed session, as well as issues

related to open meeting procedures. Summaries of the Ombudsman's previous decisions can be found in the digest: www.ombudsman.on.ca/digest.

Review

My Office reviewed documentation related to the May 12, 2021 meeting, including the agenda, minutes, invoices and correspondence. We also spoke with the Municipality's Clerk about the meeting, listened to the audio recording and reviewed relevant portions of the Municipality's procedure by-law.

On May 12, 2021, council held a special closed meeting electronically. The meeting, conducted electronically using Zoom, commenced at 1:00 p.m. with all members of council in attendance.

Council passed resolution 2021/187 to go into closed session to discuss (i) payment of legal fees and (ii) a historical insurance claim, citing the "personal matters" and "litigation" exceptions under the Act. Those we spoke with confirmed that the "personal matters" exception applied to the first topic of discussion, while the "litigation" exception applied only to the second matter related to an insurance claim. The complaints received by my Office pertained only to the first topic.

My review found that council discussed whether the Municipality should pay certain legal fees, in the process referencing previous instances when legal fees had been incurred for a number of confidential matters. Council did not pass any resolutions pertaining to the payment of the legal fees or provide any direction to staff on the matter.

Following discussion of the second topic, council approved minutes from a previous closed session meeting and passed a resolution to rise from closed session at 1:48 p.m.

Application of the "personal matters" exception

The personal matters exception applies to discussions that reveal personal information about an identifiable individual. In order to qualify as personal information, it must be reasonable to expect that an individual could be identified if the information were disclosed publicly.¹

The Act does not define "personal matters" for the purposes of the open meeting rules. When reviewing the parameters of the open meeting exceptions, my Office has often considered decisions of the Office of the Information and Privacy Commissioner (the

¹ *Ontario (Ministry of Correctional Services) v Goodis* [2008], OJ No 289 at para 69 [Goodis].

“IPC”). Although not binding on our Office, these cases can be informative. The IPC has found that information will only qualify as personal for the purposes of the Act if it pertains to an individual in their personal capacity, rather than their professional capacity.² Information about a person in their professional capacity may still qualify if it reveals something personal about the individual, such as information about job performance.³

As noted by the Ontario Superior Court of Justice in *Ontario (Ministry of Correctional Services) v. Goodis*, “if there is reasonable expectation that the individual can be identified from the information, then such information qualifies...as personal information.”⁴

My Office has found in past cases that discussion of indemnification for legal fees on its own does not fit any of the exceptions in the Act.⁵ In this case, however, my review found that council’s discussion about legal fees, which identified why the legal advice had been sought and previous instances in which the municipality had incurred legal fees, revealed personal information about identifiable individuals as a matter of necessity.

Although all exceptions to the open meeting requirements should be interpreted narrowly and applied prudently, in this case the closed session discussions fit within the parameters of the “personal matters” exception.

Conclusion

Our review indicates that council for the Municipality did not contravene the open meeting requirements on May 12, 2021 when discussing the payment of legal fees in closed session under the Act.

I would like to thank the Municipality for its co-operation during my review. The Clerk confirmed that this letter would be included as correspondence at an upcoming council meeting.

² IPC Order MO-2204 and *Township of Russell, 2014*.

³ *South Huron (Municipality of) (Re)*, 2015 ONOMBUD 6 at para 18, <<https://canlii.ca/t/gtp80>>.

⁴ *Goodis*, *supra* note 5.

⁵ Letter from Ombudsman of Ontario to the Town of Midland, (February 4, 2014), online: <https://www.ombudsman.on.ca/Files/sitemedia/Documents/Midland-closing-letter-July-22-mtg-final.pdf>; *Norfolk (County)*, 2016 ONOMBUD 7 at para 33, <<https://canlii.ca/t/h2sth>>; *Amherstburg (Town of)*, 2016 ONOMBUD 9 at para 77, <<https://canlii.ca/t/h2stm>>.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Paul Dubé". The signature is stylized with a large, sweeping initial "P" and a cursive "Dubé".

Paul Dubé
Ombudsman of Ontario

CC: Melanie Ducharme, Municipal Clerk / Planner, Municipality of West Nipissing