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Will Halton Hills Council's 'culture of secrecy' - come to an end?

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Ontario's Ombudsman - André Marin

Halton Hills: Welcomed new provisions to [The Municipal Act](#) are leading to what taxpayers of Halton Hills have always expected and demanded from their local town council - a complaints investigator to bring an end to council's backroom in-camera practice in executing its public affairs and private business dealings.

The new provisions – effective Jan. 1, 2008 – subject any municipal council, board or other decision-making body to an investigation if its members meet behind closed doors (with some exceptions). Where a municipality has not appointed its own investigator, complaints about closed meetings will be handled by the Ombudsman's office. In keeping with the tradition of ombudsmen around the world, Mr. Marin's office will not charge fees to complainants or municipalities, to ensure his services are accessible to all.

"The purpose of the legislation is to foster an environment of openness and transparency," said Mr. Marin. "If municipal politicians try to make decisions in secret, the public can now hold them to account. If their municipality hasn't appointed its own investigator, people can turn to the Ombudsman of Ontario to investigate their complaint."

Information about the new legislation and the complaints process is now available at the Ombudsman's website, www.ombudsman.on.ca. The Ombudsman's Office will also maintain information on [which of Ontario's 445 municipalities have appointed investigators](#).

The Ombudsman is an independent officer of the Ontario legislature, funded by the province. His office handles some 20,000 individual complaints a year in addition to conducting frequent systemic investigations into issues of maladministration in provincial government ministries, agencies, boards and commissions. Mr. Marin's recent investigations have prompted the province to improve newborn screening, compensation of crime victims and the lottery system.

In the past, many community members have logged complaints with the Ombudsman over [questionable land transfer dealings](#) involving family members and friends of council, [alleged unlawful discriminatory practices](#) against those who've raised awareness in the community over issues that don't reflect favourably upon members of council. The Ombudsman has never had any jurisdiction to investigate the governing municipal affairs, but has over the years gathered enough complaints to warrant an amendment to his mandate and the municipal act to have the complaints investigated that voters and community members have against the municipal affairs and business dealing of their local governing body's.

How or when will Halton Hills comply is uncertain, as yet, they haven't made it to the [Ombudsman's compliance list](#). What we can expect; based on [council's previous interest in having an outsider police its own activities](#), and the privacy privileges this council has grown accustomed to having, odds are that in an attempt to maintain some level of control and influence over its beloved '[culture of secrecy](#)', the Council of The Town of Halton Hills will likely, at an added cost to the property owners in the Town of Halton Hills, employ the services of its own investigator, rather than use the FREE unbiased services of [Ontario's civil affairs watchdog](#), Mr Morin, who is already employed by the people of Ontario and been given a mandate to handle such complaints, at no extra cost to taxpayers.

More info:

[FAQ on closed meetings.](#)

[Legislation at a glance.](#)