

News Norfolk & Region

Secret meeting fallout continues



By [Monte Sonnenberg](#), Simcoe Reformer

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Norfolk council continues to make amends for its past practice of transacting public business behind closed doors.

In an unusual move, council approved a motion of reconsideration Tuesday so it could review a decision it made in-camera May 24.

The issue in question was Hastings Drive in Long Point and whether council should pursue the development of new cottages on vacant lots there.

At the May 24 meeting, council went behind closed doors, discussed the matter, and then voted to take unbridled development off the table. At Tuesday's meeting, Mayor Charlie Luke said a crisis of conscience prompted him to seek a motion of reconsideration.

"It's not about pointing fingers," Luke said. "It's about thinking on our feet. Sometimes we do and sometimes we don't."

Windham Coun. Jim Oliver said revisiting the matter in open session was the right thing to do.

"Everything that was discussed in the May 24 closed session should have been discussed in open session," he said.

Norfolk council has been walking on egg shells since Ontario ombudsman Paul Dube flagged council for holding an illegal secret meeting Dec. 1.

On the agenda was the county contract for legal services and whether council should put the matter out to tender or go with its current providers in Hamilton and Toronto. Council opted for the latter, prompting three complaints to the ombudsman.

In his report, Dube also took the county to task for routinely withholding information on its agenda about the nature of the in-camera meetings it holds. At the very least, Dube said there should be a subject heading so taxpayers know what council is discussing.

Norfolk council agendas have been reading much differently since Dube's report.

In-camera meetings last week involved verbal updates on the "County manager performance appraisal" and the "Port Dover Medical Centre status."

At Tuesday's meeting, there was an in-camera verbal update regarding a "community services staff-related matter." There have also been recent in-camera discussions about the OPP shooting range south of Waterford and the ongoing controversy there.

Council set aside a portion of Tuesday's meeting to question CAO Keith Robicheau and clerk Andy Grozelle about Dube's findings. In his report, Dube noted that Grozelle wanted to have the council discussion about legal services in

open session but was overruled by Robicheau.

Robicheau explained Tuesday that he decided to take the matter in camera in good faith. Robicheau said he fully expected a discussion on sensitive matters such as fees and qualifications of prospective candidates.

“The ombudsman is dealing with perfect 20-20 hindsight,” Robicheau said. “Going into that meeting, it was reasonable, in my view, to expect that we’d be talking about identifiable individuals involving lawyers and law firms and litigation and potential litigation.”

Robicheau added that a public discussion of fees and competing legal firms may have “disadvantaged the municipality” in its quest for a new contract.

“Based on information available prior to the Dec. 1 meeting, I thought we had a solid basis for going into closed session,” Robicheau said.

At the Dec. 1 meeting, council agreed on a four-year extension for its current legal representatives in Hamilton and Toronto. That angered lawyers and legal firms in Norfolk that weren’t even allowed to make a pitch for the work.

Council’s decision to continue the moratorium on new cottage development on Hastings Drive has also angered property owners there.

Mary Weber, owner of two cottages and two vacant beach lots, recently represented Hastings Drive cottage owners on a technical advisory committee regarding the future of new development on the west side of Long Point. Weber was displeased to learn that council took her preferred option off the table behind the public’s back.

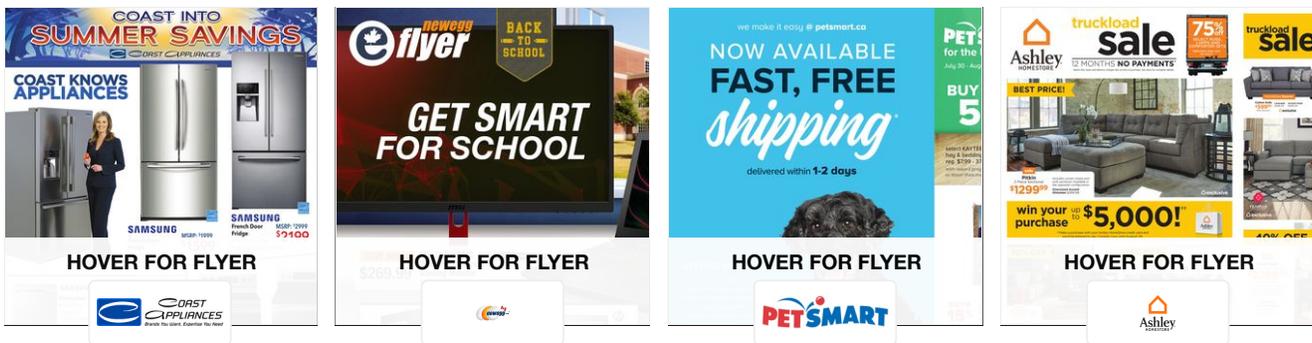
“I think we got shafted,” Weber said Wednesday. “They had an in-camera meeting and made decisions we should’ve known about. I think it’s a poor way to act. I’m not accusing anyone of doing anything illegal. But it was sneaky.

“I feel now that development on Hastings will not happen in my lifetime. I at least had the hope that we’d be able to make our case.”

A severe winter storm in 1985 wiped out dozens of cottages in Long Point. Since then, Hastings Drive has been designated hazard land.

Some on council want to rezone Hastings to allow development. However, council voted 5-4 Tuesday to take that option off the table. Delhi Coun. Mike Columbus said the Ontario Municipal Board and assorted provincial ministries would likely stand in the way of intensive development in the affected area.

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