

OPINION



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Ombudsman needs more power to probe MUSH

ISSUE:

Ontario's ombudsman rejected 2,541 complaints because it lacked authority to investigate.

It's time to get a handle on the MUSH sector. In his recent report, Ontario ombudsman Andre Marin once again requested the province expand the mandate of his office to include municipalities, universities, schools and hospitals. At the same time, he's also asking for powers to investigate children's aid societies, long-term care homes and police.

Despite promises from the provincial Liberal government and former premier Dalton McGuinty, those eagerly hoping to see an independent third-party oversee the so-called MUSH sector will have to continue to be patient. But patience may be in short supply among those awaiting increased scrutiny over the MUSH sector. Ontario's first ombudsman, Arthur Maloney, called for it nearly 35 years ago.

Oversight is an important issue and that deserves more of the government's attention.

Last year, the ombudsman's office turned away 2,541 complaints about the MUSH sector because it had no authority to investigate them. That figure amounts to 13 per cent of the number of complaints the ombudsman received during 2012-13.

The subjects of these complaints range from prolonged emergency room wait times and suspicious billing practices at hospitals to improper closed meetings at municipalities. And while the ombudsman's office does serve as closed session meeting investigator for 189 of 444 municipalities, most have elected to appoint the Association of Municipalities of Ontario's Local Authority Services to perform that function.

Beyond those, the ombuds-

man's office had to turn down complaints about fees and the quality of instruction at our universities and the use of "blocker shields" on students with autism and bullying in our schools. The list goes on and on.

"Sadly, it seems that 'anybody but the ombudsman' is the rallying cry for some government insiders," Mr. Marin said in his report, adding that the alternatives lack the kind of independence his office affords.

Around York Region, most organizations were dragging their feet, if not resistant to the idea of ombudsman oversight.

Southlake Regional Health Centre said it hadn't reviewed the details of Mr. Marin's report and the Ontario Hospital Association could not be reached for comment in time for the deadline on our story. York University in Toronto said it already had an ombudsperson in place that looked into complaints.

As for the municipalities and school boards, York Region CAO Bruce Macgregor said that oversight wasn't necessary, as citizens could complain directly to their politicians about issues or, if that failed to get action, vote their elected representatives out. York Region District School Board said their trustees offered a prescription for accountability.

The trouble is, if your councillor, mayor or trustee doesn't take your complaint seriously or is, in fact, your problem, four years is a long time to potentially grin and bear it assuming, of course, your neighbours feel the same way and vote the offending politician out. It's even harder to affect change at an organization with an appointed board such as a hospital or university.

Some form of third-party investigative process goes a long way to assure you that, even if the decision doesn't go your way, the issue has been handled fairly.

BOTTOM LINE: The ombudsman must be able to hold the MUSH sector accountable.

LETTER OF THE WEEK

Wait staff serve up donation so needy kids can play hockey

Dawn Batchelor (Lion of Stouffville) and Lorrie Ramsay (Boston Pizza) organized the third SOS (Servers of Stouffville) golf tournament. The proceeds are donated back to the community, with the Kids First Fund and other charities benefiting.

We all tip our local wait staff when we get the great service with which we have become familiar in Stouffville; now they are returning the favour by giving back to the community.

Thanks to their generosity, this year's tournament will help to support approximately six children with their dream to play minor hockey in Stouffville.

For a very reasonable tournament fee, we got a round of golf, including cart and a great dinner, plus prizes.

The tournament was well run and orga-

nized, a job well done and it helps our fund off to another outstanding start for this coming season.

We are very fortunate to live in a caring community and are so thankful for all the support of the Kids First Fund: Social Night hosted by Christine and Tim McNeil, the mayor's golf tournament committee, East Side Marios Stouffville, the McDougall family annual golf tournament, players and families of the Whitchurch Stouffville Minor Hockey Association, plus numerous private donations and, of course, the Servers of Stouffville.

The SOS Tournament is held the last Saturday prior to the long weekend in July every year. Come and join in the fun. Just pop by the Lion to speak with Dawn or Boston Pizza and ask for Lorrie and find out how you can join in the fun next time.

MIKE HUMPHREYS
KIDS FIRST FUND
STOUFFVILLE

Town councillors have obligations to residents, too

Re: Big 5-0 election project.

I am offended by the recent columns regarding non-voters as they seem to be directed at all readers.

When I got my first vote, I was 21 years of age. Then they made it easier for "them" (the elected and candidates) to get votes when the age was lowered to 19. We didn't bitch.

I voted when I was 21 and I haven't missed an opportunity to vote since.

I have driven from as far away as Huntsville to exercise my right to vote.

On the other hand, a councillor who fails to attend council meetings to represent his or her constituents, should not collect his or her salary without it being considered an act of fraud — illness being excused.

The people this article is aimed at likely don't pick the paper up from their door until it is time to put it in the recycling bin on collection day.

My involvement around the community has afforded me the opportunity to speak with longtime residents, as well as our many newcomers and I can't believe the number of people who aren't regular readers.

I have spoken with several who had no idea what The Stouffville Sun-Tribune was, or that they could find information about the community and its businesses, let alone council information.

I was a second-year apprentice before I had a vote and I have had that privilege for 47 years now and have exercised every one of them.

Yet the recipients of the majority of votes try everything to refuse or reject my right to complain.

The Big 5-0

Let's get you interested in voting



They run for a job and know what the pay is — they shouldn't have the right to vote themselves an increase until near the end of their term.

The councillor (Rob Hargrave) who claimed we don't have the right to complain unless we voted should also realize as our representative, councillors have an obligation to attend every council meeting to represent us and by "us".

Your wishes and thoughts are secondary to those wishes and thoughts of the majority of the riding or ward.

STEVE PICKARD
STOUFFVILLE

Editor's note: Did you vote? We are compiling your opinions for our Big 5-0 Project (check Hot Topics at yorkregion.com) to engage you in municipal government and encourage you to vote in 2014. E-mail jmason@yrmg.com