

SUPPORTING FAIRNESS IN B.C. LOCAL GOVERNMENTS

The Office of the Ombudsperson, Prevention Initiatives Team

Introduction

To help promote continuous improvement in the local government sector, the Ombudsperson's Prevention Initiatives Team is pleased to be sharing some of the lessons learned from our Office's work investigating complaints about B.C. local governments.

This quarter, we share a complaint that we investigated and settled in June of 2018. The central issue in this complaint was about the importance of local governments ensuring that community consultation tools engage both full-time and seasonal residents. We hope you will find this information useful in thinking about your own local government's approach to community consultation.

Our investigation

In the spring of 2018, the Office of the Ombudsperson received a complaint from a seasonal resident about their local government. The person's complaint concerned their local government's approach to community consultation regarding changes being made to a region-wide service. The local government had held a public information meeting regarding these proposed changes. However, this meeting was held in late fall, when the complainant and other seasonal residents were away.

Although there is no requirement for local governments to hold community consultation or information meetings at specific dates or times to accommodate seasonal residents, the Office of the Ombudsperson was concerned that there was no up-to-date information made publicly available about the proposed changes via any other communication channel for residents who were unable to attend the public meeting that was held in the off-season. The local government, in this case, agreed with the Office of the Ombudsperson's suggestion to commit to periodically updating their website so that information about any proposed changes to region-wide services would be available to both full-time and seasonal residents.

The challenge faced by this local government is not unique. During the summer months, many regions in British Columbia see an influx of seasonal residents who keep homes in the community, but only reside there for part of the year. It can be challenging for local governments to ensure there are adequate opportunities for seasonal residents to be informed and to meaningfully engage in local government decisions that impact their community.

Local governments can adopt notification tools that reach seasonal residents who are often unable to attend meetings in person. Having a strong online presence is a good way to ensure that information about proposed changes is widely available to both full-time and seasonal residents. This may involve having materials available on your website and engaging the community through various social media platforms. By providing key information updates online, your local government will reach a greater audience within your community. Although social media and website updates do not replace traditional engagement techniques such as open houses or traditional mail outs, members of the public will be able to visit your local government's website and find all the most up-to-date and relevant information on proposed or current projects happening in your local area.

Interested in How We Can Help? Contact the Prevention Initiatives Team

Did you know that the Office of the Ombudsperson has a new Prevention Initiatives Team that offers proactive engagement and consultation with public bodies to address program and service issues? The Prevention Initiatives Team was established in July 2017 as a three-year pilot program with the goal of improving fairness in B.C.'s public service.

What do we do?

We deliver educational webinars

- **Fairness in Practice: Why Relationships Matter in Public Service Delivery**
- **Fairness in Practice: Aspects of Procedural Fairness**

All of our webinars are available online at: <https://www.bcombudsperson.ca/resources/prevention>.

We create publications and educational resources

- **Open Meetings: Best Practices for Local Governments.** Available at <https://www.bcombudsperson.ca/documents/open-meetings-best-practices-guide-local-governments>
- **Bylaw Enforcement: Best Practices Guide for Local Governments.** Available at: <http://www.bcombudsperson.ca/documents/bylaw-enforcement-best-practices-guide-local-governments>
- Our team will be developing additional best practices guides on administrative fairness, complaint resolution, and other topics as we identify the need through our consultations with public bodies. We welcome your thoughts on future topics for a best practices guide.

We facilitate fairness workshops

- The Prevention Initiatives Team has also developed an in-person Fairness in Practice Workshop that offers the opportunity for skills development.
- Our workshops are activity-based and provide participants with an opportunity to learn about the role of the Ombudsperson, key principles of administrative fairness, and tips for effective complaint resolution.

We deliver online training

- We are currently developing an online training program that will be available soon.
- This online course will cover the principles of administrative fairness and some key tips to good public service delivery.

We offer voluntary consultations

- We offer proactive consultation and training to support fairness and continuous improvement across the public sector.
- Our current activities include offering voluntary consultations on proposed or existing policies and programs, including advising on internal complaint resolution processes.

Stay Connected

If you are interested in receiving updates on upcoming webinars, workshops and other Prevention Team activities please contact us at consult@bcombudsperson.ca to be added to our mailing list.

