

Ombudsman fee to remain in place

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COBOURG — A recent call from the Cobourg Taxpayers Association for the abolition of the \$25 fee to access the services of the Ombudsman turned out to be incorrect, council learned this week.

In October, the organization's secretary, Dennis Nabieszko, made the plea, stating that Cobourg is the only organization in the world that puts up barriers to the services of an ombudsman.

A report from bylaw enforcement and policy co-ordinator Brent Larmer delivered at this week's committee-of-the-whole meeting stated that no fees are charged for the services of the Municipal Ombudsman or Integrity Commissioner investigations — the fee applies only to investigations having to do with closed meetings.

And council supported Larmer's recommendation that the fee remain.

Larmer's report explained the functions of the Ombudsman and Integrity Commissioner.

The latter investigates suspected council or local-board contraventions of the applicable Code of Conduct Policy and may recommend penalties if indicated.

The Municipal Ombudsman reports to council and his or her role is to "investigate in an independent manner any decision or recommendation made by or an act done or omitted in the course of the administration of a municipality, its local boards and such municipally controlled corporations as the municipality may specify and affecting any person or body of persons in his, her or its personal capacity."

Both are free — the only time a \$25 fee applies is when the Ombudsman investigates a closed meeting, as a means to cover staff time and municipal resources.

Deputy Mayor John Henderson pointed out that Larmer's report shows a range of fees for this particular service.

In Northumberland, it's the same as the fee charged by Port Hope and Trent Hills. No other municipality charges for this service. Provincially, fees range from \$5 in Collingwood to \$125 in larger municipalities.

"The fee is reasonable in light of other municipalities," Henderson declared.

Councillor Brian Darling asked how often the fee is charged. Henderson said only once "in the last little while."

Mayor Gil Brocanier had consulted the integrity commissioner on the issue, and relayed his remarks.

"He said absolutely, we should (retain the fee)," Brocanier reported.

"It acts as a deterrent against frivolous complaints."