



WEST HANTS REGIONAL MUNICIPALITY REPORT

Information ☐	Recommendation ☐	Decision Request ☒	Councillor Activity ☐
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To: Mayor Zebian and members of Council

Submitted by: _____
Deanna Snair, Municipal Clerk

Date: December 3, 2024 Committee of the Whole

Subject: Correspondence on Meeting Agendas

LEGISLATIVE AUTHORITY

Nova Scotia Municipal Government Act (MGA), Section 12(6) The council of a county or district municipality may, by policy, adopt rules governing the election of a warden by the council members.

RECOMMENDATION or DECISION REQUEST

It is recommended for Committee of the Whole to recommend that ...

“Council directs the CAO to implement an auto-response for all incoming emails pertaining to West Hants Regional Municipality and further should a member of Council determine a piece of correspondence warrants further discussion, it will be at the discretion of that Council member to bring forward correspondence they would like publicly addressed in a written report for Council to consider”.

As all Council members receive this email, it is then at the discretion of a Council member to bring forward any correspondence they would like publicly addressed.

BACKGROUND

The topic of public correspondence has been a topic of discussion at several meetings. Questions arising from this discussion related to why some correspondence was not added to the agenda. In some cases, correspondence may be inflammatory, inaccurate and defamatory, which could lead to litigation.

Property ☐	Public Opinion ☒	Environment ☐	Social ☐	Economic ☐	Councillor Activity ☒
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DISCUSSION

Correspondence is defined as the act of sending and receiving written communications either by letter or email.

Although WHRM does not have a policy pertaining to correspondence and how it should be handled, the past practice has been to include all correspondence received up to and including the date of the meeting (even up to the hour prior to the meeting). Recently questions around correspondence and the rationale for it being added or not being added to an agenda have arisen.

West Hants Regional Municipal Council receives a large quantity of correspondence on a variety of topics. Engaging public in decision making is an important cornerstone of democracy and is based on the idea that people who may be impacted by a decision have a right to be involved in the process and have their voices heard.

Section 16 of the Meeting and Procedural Policy speaks to receiving Public Input but does not speak directly about public correspondence received. Staff are recommending any correspondence received not signed, will not be reviewed by the clerk or shared with members of Council.

16.1 Council and Committees of Council members may obtain public input and opinions from residents in the following manner:

- a) speaking with a resident directly;
- b) at public consultation and information meetings;
- c) during Public Hearings;
- d) through formal presentation during meetings, requests which have been received by staff may be placed on the meeting agenda and approved by the Chair, prior to the meeting;
- e) during the allotted twenty (20) minutes of Public Participation on the Committee of the Whole Agenda. A member of the public may speak for a maximum of five (5) minutes each during this period;
- f) through formal petitions and written applications to Council.

16.2 Petitions and applications to Council will be:

- g) legibly written or printed on paper;
- h) will have endorsed upon it the name, address and signature of one or more petitioners, applicants or required persons, and the substance of the matter contained in it.
- i) be presented by a Council member or staff member who will inform Council of the contents and ask permission of Council for it to be read on behalf of petitioners;
- j) Council may decide to hear a summary of a petition or written application in lieu of hearing the reading of the entire petition or written application.

In speaking with other municipal units, it was found that many municipal bodies across Nova Scotia have differing approaches when dealing with public correspondence. Written correspondence to a council should be submitted to the Municipal Clerk for review a week or so before the meeting.

Some examples of what other municipal units are doing are listed below:

Example 1:

Correspondence is circulated to Mayor and Council members, the clerk verbally announces which agenda items have received correspondence during correspondence section the agenda and it is noted in the minutes, but the correspondence is not included in the agenda package. There must be an agenda item already on the agenda.

Example 2:

Correspondence is no longer added to Council agendas. These municipalities identified the work required to review and redact identifying information was and can be quite time consuming, in some cases, there were instances where a person shared correspondence that was not intended for public viewing causing public to be upset.

Example 3:

Written comments will be distributed to Members of the Regional Council as well as to relevant staff when the clerk receives correspondence. They will be kept on file as part of the official operational files. As part of the public record, comments will be distributed to other members of the public on request. Signatures and contact information is removed before comments are distributed to the public; however, the full submission may be viewed by request in the Municipal Clerk's Office.

Example 4:

Some municipalities have created an auto-response for all incoming emails. As all Council members receive this email, it is then at the discretion of a Council member to bring forward any correspondence they would like publicly addressed. Council members are responsible for creating a report to address the correspondence.

Example 5:

Correspondence is included in the agenda if sent to the council 5 days before the meeting. It will be listed on the meeting agenda under the section entitled correspondence.

In an effort to be fully transparent, staff are recommending Council consider establishing a protocol to address correspondence establishes a formalized process to ensure all Council related interactions are addressed in a consistent. transparent and efficient manner.

As part of the discussion of Council on how they would like to process, Council is being encouraged to reflect on:

- if the desire is to have correspondence remain on the agenda and continue as status quo,
- if the desire is to have correspondence remain on the agenda, if the response is yes, then staff encourage Council to consider implanting a deadline for correspondence to be received by in order for it to be included as part of an agenda package. (Same day, 3 Days prior to the meeting, 5 days prior to the meeting or another specified time).
- Would Council like to see an auto-response generated for all incoming emails and then it will be at the discretion of a Councillor to bring forward any correspondence they would like publicly addressed.

Having a means for residents to communicate helps to foster a sense of community and engagement among residents and can lead to better understanding and support of government initiatives.

Staff understand the importance of having an open and transparent government and ensuring that relevant municipal information is available to the public, including budgets, meeting minutes, reports, policies, and records that help the public understand government operations.

It is important to acknowledge at times West Hants receives a large quantity of correspondence and understand that at times this can detract from other community obligations. It is critical to find a stream that provides opportunities for residents to voice their concerns/opinions but also is fair, manageable, and beneficial to the community as a whole.

If the desire of Council is to continue to have correspondence added as part of agenda packages, staff are recommending that a cut off deadline for submissions be implemented.

NEXT STEPS

To be determined by Council.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

There are no financial implications associated with this report.

ALTERNATIVES

1. Council may choose to continue as status quo
2. Council may choose to provide alternate direction

ATTACHMENTS

None

CHIEF ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICER REVIEW

As discussed in the report, as well as at recent orientation sessions, staff are looking for direction with respect to the administration of correspondence. Staff have provided options to Council but have made a suggestion through the recommendation.

I support the recommendation but look forward to creating policy that best reflects the position of Council regarding this matter.

Report Prepared by: _____

Deanna Snair, Municipal Clerk

Report Approved by:  _____

Mark Phillips, Chief Administrative Officer