

Integrity Commissioner's Annual Report
Township of Essa

Principles *Integrity* is pleased to submit this annual report, covering the period from February 1, 2021, the date of our last annual report, and May 31, 2022.

The purpose of an Integrity Commissioner's annual report is to provide the public with the opportunity to understand the ethical well-being of the Township elected and appointed officials through the lens of our activities.

About Us:

Principles *Integrity* is a partnership focused on accountability and governance matters for municipalities as well as other locally-elected and appointed governing bodies. Since its formation, Principles *Integrity* has been appointed as Integrity Commissioner (and as Lobbyist Registrar/Closed Meeting Investigator/Municipal Ombudsman for some clients) in over 50 Ontario municipalities and other public bodies. Part of our mission is to advance the Municipal Integrity Commissioner of Ontario (MICO), where we have led development of MICO's response to the Provincial consultations and Ombudsman Office relations.

The Role of Integrity Commissioner, Generally:

An Integrity Commissioner's statutory role is to carry out, in an independent manner, the following functions:

- Advice on ethical policy development
- Education on matters relating to ethical behaviour
- Providing on request, advice and opinions to Council, members of Council and members of Local Boards
- Providing a mechanism to receive inquiries (often referred to as 'complaints') which allege a breach of ethical responsibilities
- Resolving complaints informally, where appropriate, and
- Investigating, reporting and making recommendations to Council on those complaints that cannot be resolved informally, while being guided by Council's codes, policies and protocols.

This might contrast with the popular yet incorrect view that the role of the Integrity Commissioner is primarily to hold elected officials to account; to investigate alleged transgressions and to recommend 'punishment'. The better view is that Integrity Commissioners serve as an independent resource, coach, and guide, focused on enhancing

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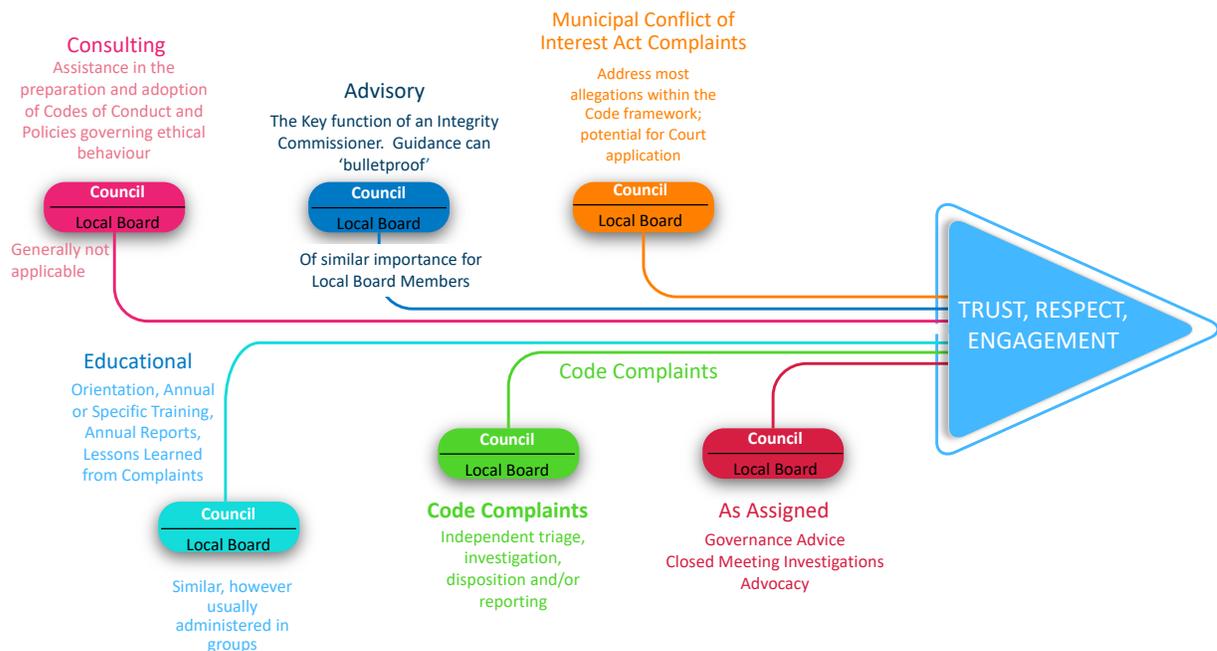
the municipality's ethical culture.

The operating philosophy of Principles *Integrity* recites this perspective. We believe there is one overarching objective for a municipality in appointing an Integrity Commissioner, and that is to raise the public's perception that its elected and appointed officials conduct themselves with integrity:

The perception that a community's elected representatives are operating with integrity is the glue which sustains local democracy. We live in a time when citizens are skeptical of their elected representatives at all levels. The overarching objective in appointing an Integrity Commissioner is to ensure the existence of robust and effective policies, procedures, and mechanisms that enhance the citizen's perception that their Council (and local boards) meet established ethical standards and where they do not, there exists a review mechanism that serves the public interest.

The practical effect of achieving this objective is an increase in trust, respect and engagement in local affairs.

In carrying out our broad functions, the role falls into two principal areas. 'Municipal Act' functions, focused on codes of conduct and other policies relating to ethical behaviour, and 'MCIA' or *Municipal Conflict of Interest Act* functions. From an activity perspective, an Integrity Commissioner's role can be depicted this way:



The emphasis of Principles *Integrity* is to help municipalities enhance their ethical foundations and reputations through the drafting of effective codes of conduct and other policies

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governing ethical behaviour, to provide meaningful education related to such policies, and to provide pragmatic binding advice to Members seeking clarification on ethical issues. As noted in the graphic, we believe that the support we give to Members of Council increases the public's perception of them, which in turn leads to greater trust, respect and engagement.

Because the development of policy and the provision of education and advice is not in every case a full solution, the broad role of the Integrity Commissioner includes the function of seeking and facilitating resolutions when allegations of ethical transgressions are made, and, where it is appropriate and in the public interest to do so, conducting and reporting on formal investigations. This in our view is best seen as a residual and not primary role.

Confidentiality:

Much of the work of an Integrity Commissioner is done under a cloak of confidentiality. While in most cases secrecy is required by statute, the promise of confidentiality also encourages full disclosure by the people who engage with us. We maintain the discretion to release confidential information when it is necessary to do so for the purposes of a public report, but those disclosures would be limited and rare.

Our Activity for the Township:

As municipalities head into an election year, we reflect back on the past term of Council from our vantage point as Integrity Commissioner. Members of Council, individually and collectively, have demonstrated a solid understanding and commitment to ethical conduct and behaviour. Where concerns have arisen, we have been pleased to provide advice and guidance to support Members in meeting the high standards expected by the public, and in assisting the public in holding their elected representatives accountable for the ethical conduct.

During the period covered by this report, we have been engaged in a moderate level of activity as Integrity Commissioner for the Township which subdivides roughly into three categories:

1. Policy Development and Education

During the period covered by this report, there has not been the opportunity for us to be engaged in any policy development or education with the municipality.

2. Advice

The advice function of the Integrity Commissioner is available to all Members of Council and where applicable their staff and Members of local boards on matters relating to the code of conduct, the *Municipal Conflict of Interest Act* and any other matter touching upon the ethical conduct of Members. Advice provided by the Integrity Commissioner is confidential and independent, and where all the relevant facts are disclosed, is binding upon the Integrity Commissioner.

Our advice is typically provided in a short Advice Memorandum which confirms all relevant facts and provides with clarity our analysis and a recommended course of action.

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During the period covered by this report, we responded to 4 such requests for advice.

3. Complaint Investigation and Resolution

Our approach to reviewing complaints starts with a determination as to whether an inquiry to us is within our jurisdiction, is beyond a trifling matter, is not either frivolous or vexatious, and importantly, whether in its totality it is in the public interest to pursue. We always look to the possibility of informal resolution in favour of formal investigation and reporting. Once a formal investigation is commenced, the opportunity to seek informal resolution is not abandoned.

Where we are able to resolve a matter without concluding a formal investigation, our practice is to provide a written explanation in the form of a Disposition Letter to the complainant to close the matter. Often the respondent Member is involved in preliminary fact-finding and will also be provided with a summary of the disposition.

Where formal investigations commence, they are conducted under the tenets of procedural fairness and Members are confidentially provided with the name of the Complainant and such information as is necessary to enable them to respond to the allegations raised.

During the period covered by this report we responded to one complaint which did not result in a full investigation and report to Council.

Ethical Themes Around the Province:

With due regard to our obligation to maintain confidentiality, this annual report enables us to identify learning opportunities from advice requests and investigations conducted in a variety of municipalities.

Disclosure of confidential information from closed meeting sessions

There have been some examples where elected or appointed officials fail to recognize the serious implications of disclosing confidential information, particularly information learned of through attendance in closed session.

A Member's obligation to maintain confidentiality is clear. They may not unilaterally decide to share confidential information, even if they believe the information should be publicly disclosed. This extends to releasing information even to their own legal counsel to obtain a 'second opinion'.

We treat this breach of ethical responsibility as breach of a cardinal rule, and if an allegation in this regard is proved to be true, it tends to attract a recommended sanction at the upper end of the prescribed range. Left unchecked, confidentiality breaches undermine not only Council's interests on the matter subject to the breach, but destroys the trust required of elected officials, and the staff that support them, to ensure that all relevant, and sensitive, information required to support the deliberation on a matter is freely supplied.

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Non-disparagement

One area of prominence continues to be the failure of some Members of Council to adhere to rules against disparagement. Members of Council are entitled, and indeed expected to disagree on all manner of issues. However, one of the cornerstones to democracy must be the recognition that different opinions and perspectives are to be respected, and disagreement should not devolve into disrespect, disparagement and name-calling.

Disrespectful interactions and/treatment of others can fall along a continuum which may manifest as occasional incivility and micro-aggressions, but when unchecked can culminate in bullying and harassment. Members of Council should be mindful to treat each other, staff and the public with appropriate respect and professionalism at all times.

Some Members of Council hold a view was that they are entitled to their freely express their opinion, even if that includes disparagement of others, and so long as they share it via personal email, and not on the municipal server, they are not constrained by any rules around decorum. This is incorrect. Members are bound by the Code provisions of respectful and non-disparaging communication, whether sharing views on their own email, social media, or elsewhere.

Regardless of the medium, regardless of the intended audience, and regardless of motive, we have observed several instances where Members of Council in municipalities around the province have been found to have breached ethical standards by saying or recording things they have come to regret.

Recognizing and avoiding conflicts of interest

Another area Members frequently require additional clarification on is recognizing and appropriately identifying conflicts of interest when they arise. These often include when members are part of another organization or club whose interests are impacted by a matter before Council, or when members are active professionally within the community and a matter before Council may potentially impact one of their current or past clients.

Take-aways from the Collingwood Inquiry

The Collingwood judicial inquiry published its report, entitled “Transparency and the Public Trust: Report of the Collingwood Judicial Inquiry,” on November 2, 2020. This Report contained 306 recommendations relating to best practices in municipal governance.

In particular, the Report contained important discussion regarding the rules relating to conflicts of interest applied to municipal councillors under the Municipal Conflict of Interest Act (“MCI Act”), which are overly narrow, focusing on pecuniary (i.e. monetary) interests. The Report warns against considering “pecuniary interest” as the sole criterion in assessing whether a councillor is subject to a conflict of interest:

...it is far too easy to misconstrue the Municipal Conflict of Interest Act as addressing all the kinds of conflict of interest that Council members must

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confront. Despite its name, the Municipal Conflict of Interest Act does not provide a complete conflict of interest code for municipal actors. It addresses the pecuniary interests of a narrowly defined group of family members related to a Council member which are by virtue of the Act deemed to be pecuniary interests of the Council member. Council members are obligated to avoid all forms of conflicts of interest or, where that is not possible, to appropriately disclose and otherwise address those conflicts.

As always, obtaining clear and reliable advice from the Integrity Commissioner can help avoid costly and time-consuming investigations if there is any uncertainty about the application of the Rule.

Staying in your lane

One area of concern that continues to arise is members of Council overstepping their role, attempting to 'take the reins' to fix a constituent's problem, or directing staff how to do their job. Members of Council serve an important role in putting constituents in touch with appropriate staff, and following established processes, but it is important to strike the correct balance.

At times inappropriate interference arises because of a misinterpretation of the *Municipal Act* provisions which identify the role of the Head of Council as 'Chief Executive Officer'. This provision has led to confusion and, occasionally, overreach by Heads of Council in erroneously perceiving a role leading the municipality's administration. The Province has been requested by MICO, the Ombudsman and others, to amend the *Municipal Act*, to clarify that elected officials – even Heads of Council – have no role in the day-to-day administration of municipal government.

Failing to recognize this, stepping outside of their proper role as elected officials to 'take the reins' of administration, undermines staff and can be perceived as interfering with management. This overstepping of the proper role by Members, even Mayors, must be recognized as inappropriate under the Code of Conduct and the Council-Staff Relations Policy, both mandated under the *Municipal Act*.

As always, obtaining clear and reliable advice can help avoid a costly and time-consuming investigation.

Conclusion:

We look forward to continuing to work with Members of Council to ensure a strong ethical framework. We embrace the opportunity to elevate Members' familiarity with their obligations under the Code and to respond to emerging issues. As always, we welcome Members' questions and look forward to continuing to serve as your Integrity Commissioner.

It has been a privilege to assist you in your work by providing advice about the Code of Conduct and resolving complaints. We recognize that public service is not easy and the

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ethical issues that arise can be challenging. The public rightly demands the highest standard from those who serve them, and we congratulate Council for its aspirational objective to strive to meet that standard.

Finally, we wish to thank the Clerk and the Chief Administrative Officer for their professionalism and assistance where required. Although an Integrity Commissioner is not part of the administrative hierarchy, the work of our office depends on the facilitation of access to information and policy in order to carry out the mandate. This was done willingly and efficiently by the staff.

All of which is respectfully submitted –

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Integrity Commissioner

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