

Accessible facts



March 3, 2020 By Nate Smelle

Our greatest strength as a community comes from our ability to work together towards a common goal. Sometimes our communal goals are established in line with a shared vision of a desirable future that we define and carry forward as a collective. Other times these goals arise spontaneously when we are forced by circumstance to overcome challenges impeding our path and threatening our quality of life. Needless to say, but the latter type always tends to demand our immediate attention.

Nevertheless, whatever kind of goals a community is striving to achieve at any given moment, facts are always a key component of our success. In the absence of this essential element of accurate information, our potential for effective collaboration can become stifled and at risk of being manipulated to serve the interests of individuals. Through our votes and our hard-earned tax dollars we buy into our political system, handing over the reins to those we elect in hope that they might guide us through the storms into more pleasant waters.

As someone who has witnessed more meetings, and read more government documents than I can recall, I can tell you that no matter which level of government you are studying the overwhelming majority of information made readily available comes in the form of ?good news.? For the most part, any other information ? information that often jeopardizes the reputation of elected officials, councils, or a governing political party ? can only be attained with a magnifying glass, a sturdy dental chair, and a strong pair of pliers.

To extract such facts, however, one must first develop an accurate understanding of the context in which they arose. This type of understanding can only be achieved through the employment of a steadfast commitment to uncovering the information beneath the surface and between the lines. Unavoidably, this requires a certain level of comprehension of the language of politics that only comes from countless hours of poring over meeting agendas, minutes, and recordings where they exist. Knowing all too well how tedious this process can be, it is definitely not an endeavour most people choose to invest their free time in.

But, for those who desire to know how their tax dollars are being spent, and what they are in turn supporting with their investment, the process begins by becoming engaged. Considering the most accessible level of government tends to be of the municipal sort, I would suggest attending a meeting, taking notes, and asking questions. To take it one step further, hit the record button on your phone or voice recorder and listen to the meeting again later while going over your notes.

Realizing that due to a lack of transportation, unsuitable timing, and/or health issues not everyone has the opportunity to attend meetings in person, Hastings Highlands council recently took action to make the operation of the municipality more accessible to the public by installing a sound and video system with recording and amplification capabilities. In the coming months, Mayor Vic Bodnar said they plan to archive these recordings and eventually livestream council proceedings on the municipality's website. Knowing that this improvement in accessibility will also foster greater accuracy, efficiency, transparency, and potential for accountability, I have to wonder why such technology is not the baseline for all councils across Ontario. Furthermore, with many

councils striving to achieve this goal, I also can't help but wonder why last December Wollaston Township council decided to stop recording its meetings. Would not a higher level of accuracy, efficiency, transparency, and potential for accountability better serve the municipality?