

How to attend a council meeting

By Sarah Sobanski

One of our readers called in asking how to attend a council meeting. What are the times and dates? Is there a way to get the agenda beforehand? Is there etiquette to attending council? How do I get involved?

Attending your first council meeting is a bit intimidating. If you're like me, going to new places makes you both curious and nervous. The thing about council meetings, however, is that you have the right to attend as a citizen of Canada ? that's something we might be taking for granted, made obvious in the current political climate. (Luckily, democratic citizens can impeach week-old administrations that are destroying their rights and freedoms. I digress.) You deserve to be at the council meeting you choose to attend, don't forget that. That might help shake out the nerves.

Now that you're amped up to attend, how do you figure out when and where council meetings are? The easiest way I find is to call. The contact number for the Municipality of Hastings Highlands is 613-338-2811, which I cover; 613-332-3331 is the Town of Bancroft, which Tony Pearson covers for us here at the *This Week*; and 613-337-5731 is Wollaston Township, which Jim Eadie covers. You can give a quick call to the town and ask when the next council meeting is and usually, have a nice how's-your-day chat with a friendly municipal staff member. People seem to have developed an irrational fear of the telephone but it's very underrated. These numbers, as well as numbers and extensions for individual councillors are available on each of the municipalities' websites: www.hastingshighlands.ca, www.town.bancroft.on.ca or www.wollastontownship.ca. Contact numbers for mayors, reeves, deputy mayors and reeves and councillors can also be found there.

If I haven't convinced you that calling in is a good idea, also on these websites ? and most municipalities have a website so this goes for any municipality ? is everything you need to know to attend a council meeting. Each website will have something along the lines of a council tab. On the Bancroft website it's a Town Hall tab. On the Wollaston website it's under Township in the drop down menu.

There you'll find a link to a variation of a council meeting calendar, depending on the municipality. It's good to note that councils happen on a fairly regular schedule, usually two weeks a month, the same weeks a month. The next meeting for Hastings Highlands is Feb. 9, and for Wollaston and Bancroft is Feb. 14.

Rooting around in there you'll find council's minutes and agendas where mostly everything that happens in councils past is laid out in black and white. You can see who voted on what, what passed, what didn't and what notices of motion came up for the next council meeting. Bancroft council also has an easy to read highlights link.

Flipping through a 200-plus page agenda might not be right up your alley ? that's fine. Chances are if you're new to this a lot of it isn't going to seem straightforward anyways. There are a lot of whereas-es and drawn out ways of stating things in council meetings. My advice for your first meeting or two: go to the meeting, pick up an agenda there and follow along. Everything should be read and anything worth discussion should be debated by council in the meeting ? it's much easier to understand when the councillors are discussing something as opposed to reading it in the agenda. If you still don't understand, anything discussed in council is open to public questions at the end of the meeting during a question period.

That brings us to the final point: etiquette. Outside of the question period at the end of a council meeting, the public is there to observe only. There should be no tut-tuting, no snorting, no loud sighing and no talking amongst the public. Does it happen? Of course. Should it be happening? No. That being said, with some of what has been happening in councils across our area lately, I can see how a little booing might have been warranted.

There you have it, that's my quick notes version of how to attend a council meeting. If you haven't been and want to get involved, have at it. The more the merrier. Or, if municipal politics isn't your thing, leave it to us ? but remember, squeaky wheel gets the grease. I can't argue your points at council. I can only relate what happened.