



## A lesson in transparency

### District of Fort St. James

*Partial compliance isn't a complete answer.*

Valerie contacted us about the District of Fort St. James. The District was holding closed meetings but not making the meeting minutes available to the public. Valerie felt that the District's actions were in violation of the *Community Charter*. Valerie had spoken with the former interim Chief Administrative Officer about the matter and attended a council meeting where her questions went unanswered.

Frustrated with the District's lack of transparency, Valerie reached out for help.

We reviewed the District's Procedures Bylaw and noted it was silent about procedures to be followed in closing council or other meetings to the public and about reporting decisions made in closed meetings. We spoke to the District about this issue and were told it complied with sections 89 and 90 of the *Community Charter*, which sets out exceptions for holding open meetings. However, when we reviewed the council meeting agendas, with the exception of one meeting, we found the agendas did not identify the in-camera item as required by the *Community Charter*.

The District referred us to several meeting minutes which did record a resolution to go in-camera as well as the relevant *Community Charter* citation. It did not provide any further detail about what was discussed or the decisions made.

The District also informed us that it provides notice of meetings via email. However, members of the public must contact the District Office to add their names to the email list. We were unable to find any information about this practice on the District's website.

The BC Ombudsperson's Report [\*\*Open Meetings: Best Practices Guide For Local Governments\*\*](#) points out that regular council meeting agendas should contain a standing item called Notice of In-Camera Meeting. The guide also recommends that open council meeting agendas should be posted on the District's website in advance of meetings. This way, the public is notified in advance that a portion of an open regular council meeting is proposed to be closed.

To resolve the unfairness identified, we asked the District to:

- revise its Procedures Bylaw to correct the process used to close meetings;

- review closed meeting minutes for release in a timely manner;
- update training materials to reflect the procedural changes; and,
- post information on its website about how to receive council and other meeting minutes via email.

The District agreed to our recommendations. With the issue of unfairness resolved, we closed our file.

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