



## **OMLET Annual Report 2014-2015**

### **Opening Remarks – Acting Ombudsman Barbara Finlay**

Thank you all for being here today, in person, through teleconference and via our live webcast.

The report I am releasing today is our fourth Annual Report on our investigations of closed meetings in municipalities across the province. But it's also an ideal opportunity to discuss the exciting changes that are coming just 16 days from now, when our office will be able to take complaints about all aspects of municipal government for the first time.

We know there is strong public demand for this new oversight. Since I arrived at the Ontario Ombudsman's Office in 2005, we have had to turn away more than 11,000 municipal complaints – more than 2,200 of those in the year since Bill 8 was passed.

Today's report illustrates how far we have come in eight years of handling complaints about closed municipal meetings. We have seen cases increase – especially in the past year. But we have also seen many municipalities improve their practices as a result of the hundreds of recommendations we have made.

A few familiar issues continue to crop up – like informal gatherings of council members that sometimes veer into discussing business. And a few new ones have surfaced, like exchanges of emails that become illegal “meetings” when councillors use them to make decisions away from public view.

In the past few months, we have issued findings on another 30 meetings on top of the 85 covered in this report. We received good co-operation and constructive feedback from municipalities about our recommendations and process. We also participated in consultations with the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing on the Ministry's review of municipal legislation. Our recommendations reiterated what we have said in our OMLET reports – for example, that enforcement of the open meeting rules should be consistent, with one investigator for all municipalities, and there should be consequences for violating the law.

After January 1, we will finally be able to help the public with their concerns about any aspect of municipal government, from garbage and snow removal, to social programs, to conduct of councillors. And we will do what we have always done with provincial government complaints: Refer people to the right place to fix the problem, cut through red tape, investigate when needed, and recommend solutions to systemic problems.

We have been very busy over the past few months, reaching out to municipalities and explaining how we work. We have made it clear that our role is not to replace accountability mechanisms at

the local level. In fact, I strongly encourage all municipalities to have their own. We will be there to make sure they work as they should, and to step in where they fail, or cannot go.

Our Office will continue to use our resources to educate government officials and the public about our work. For those who may be watching, I want to add that we invite municipal stakeholders to contact us if they have questions about what's to come. We look forward to being able to help all citizens with their unresolved municipal issues in the future.

Now, I'm happy to take your questions – first here in the studio, and then we will go to the journalists joining us by phone.