



Ombudsman Paul Dubé (right) presenting the Ombudsman's Good Governance Award to Hamilton Mayor Andrea Horwath (left) at the Association of Municipalities of Ontario conference in Ottawa, August 2025. *Photo courtesy of Ombudsman Ontario*

10 years of collaboration

by Paul Dubé

On New Year's Day 2016, Ontario became one of the last provinces in Canada to extend Ombudsman oversight to municipalities. In the decade since, Ombudsman Ontario has reviewed some 30,000 complaints and inquiries about a wide range of municipal issues, helping thousands of residents and hundreds of municipalities resolve problems, strengthen processes, and improve public services along the way.

This milestone is worth celebrating, not only for the lessons learned but also for what it reveals about the co-operation that has developed between Ontario municipalities and the ombudsman's office. To understand its significance, however, we need to go back not just 10 years but 50.

Longstanding Demand for Fairness

When the Ombudsman of Ontario was first created in 1975, complaints began pouring in immediately – many of them about municipal matters like water and sewer issues, street repairs, and property taxes. Although the ombudsman lacked jurisdiction over municipalities at the time, it was clear that Ontarians wanted and needed an independent body to help resolve local concerns fairly. That need only grew over time.

In 2008, the ombudsman was tasked with investigating closed municipal meetings in municipalities that chose not to appoint their own investigator. Today, Ombudsman Ontario is the closed meeting investigator for the majority of

the province's 444 municipalities and provides resources to help local officials and the public understand and apply the open meeting rules. Among those resources is a publicly accessible digest of hundreds of decisions that serves as a helpful tool for councils, staff, and residents alike.

This early collaboration laid the foundation for 2016, when new legislation fully extended the ombudsman's mandate to municipal administration. Once again, complaints came in quickly, but so did opportunities for constructive, solutions-focused engagement with local officials.

The objective of ombudsman oversight is not to name, blame, or shame. It is always to resolve complaints quickly, avert

further problems, and support municipalities in serving their residents better.

Of the more than 30,000 cases about municipalities that Ombudsman Ontario has received since 2016, only six have resulted in a formal investigative report. The rest were resolved without necessitating an investigation – often with a phone call, referral, or practical guidance.

In fact, many municipalities have invited Ombudsman intervention, as the City of Brampton did when it sought an independent review of its procurement processes. Other investigations have led to improvements in communication, bylaw enforcement, trespass policies, and hiring procedures.

The value of these cases lies in the collaborative effect: recommendations that are based on best practices and geared toward improving services and averting future complaints not only help the municipalities under review but also often inspire others to adopt them voluntarily.

Resource for Municipalities, Safe Recourse for Residents

Over time, municipal leaders across the province have signalled that they appreciate this way of working. As one mayor told council colleagues, “The ombudsman is not an enemy ... It is healthy in our democracy to have this level of oversight.” Another councillor summed it up neatly: “It’s no fun to get a complaint, but it can be constructive.”

For municipal councils and staff, the ombudsman’s office provides:

- a neutral, evidence-based assessment of issues
- an early warning system for emerging complaint trends
- support in managing difficult complaints while protecting staff
- validation of fair, transparent processes
- practical advice and best practices that prevent future disputes or litigation

For residents, it offers a trusted, impartial avenue to raise concerns – independent of government and political partisanship.

This approach has tangible results. In the past year alone, ombudsman staff helped restore municipal hydro service

for a ventilator-dependent child, ensured fair treatment for a senior facing a tax sale of his home, and even made sure a tenant in municipal housing could reach someone to help her when she was locked out of her unit.

Ombudsman staff resolved these cases – and thousands of others – by connecting with the right local officials and working with them to find fair, compassionate, timely answers. This kind of co-operation demonstrates that oversight need not be adversarial; rather, it is a partnership to protect rights and strengthen trust in democracy. It ensures that people are able to exercise their rights at the local level, which include the right to complain, the right to observe local government in action, and the right to fairness.

Raising the Bar for Accountability

The demand for ombudsman assistance has been steady, and it continues to grow. In 2024-25, Ombudsman Ontario’s 10th year of full oversight of municipalities, there were 3,809 complaints and inquiries about them – a new record.

Another constructive development in the past decade has been legislation to strengthen local governance. The ombudsman supported mandatory codes of conduct and integrity commissioners at the local level across the province, which came into effect in 2019.

As more municipalities established their own accountability officers, ombudsman staff were there to suggest best practices to ensure fairness and transparency. Their role is not to do the work of those officers but to share best practices and reinforce fairness across the system.

In that spirit, as part of Ombudsman Ontario’s 50th anniversary activities in 2025, a new award was launched: the Ombudsman’s Good Governance Award. The award, recognizing exemplary administrative practices, first went to the City of Hamilton for eliminating a \$100 fee to file complaints with its integrity commissioner.

No one should have to overcome obstacles like fees or onerous procedures

to exercise their democratic rights. Hamilton removed this barrier to access while maintaining strong safeguards against frivolous and vexatious complaints. This simple but powerful change exemplifies how municipalities can enhance fairness through thoughtful reforms – changes that benefit residents and strengthen public confidence.

Partnering for Better Governance

Beyond resolving complaints, the ombudsman helps equip municipalities with resources to strengthen governance, such as tip cards; training materials, and guides on fairness, open meetings, codes of conduct, and best practices for integrity commissioners.

This work demonstrates that oversight and collaboration are not opposites. They are complementary forces that work in partnership to enhance public trust and improve municipal services. The results achieved in thousands of cases prove that independent oversight complements, rather than overwhelms, local governance.

The past decade has shown that ombudsman oversight at the municipal level works best through co-operation. Listening, engaging, and offering constructive feedback is key to this approach. Tens of thousands of residents have benefited from having their concerns heard, while many municipalities have had their good practices validated and their efforts to improve governance supported.

The only thing better than resolving complaints is preventing them through fairness and improved services to the public. It has been a privilege to work with municipal leaders, staff, and residents to advance fairness, accountability, and trust in local government. May this collaboration deepen in the decades to come.



Paul Dubé is Ombudsman of Ontario. Dubé was appointed in 2016 after serving as Canada’s first taxpayers’ ombudsman.