

The price of transparency : About \$195 an hour

par Richard.Mahoney

Information may be power, but it can get a little pricey if you are seeking facts from the town of Hawkesbury.

A \$195 hourly legal bill is one of the costs the Hawkesbury Citizens' Association would have to pay if it proceeded with an access. The association will appeal to the Ontario Information and Privacy Commissioner after being told it would have to pay \$561.80 to a legal firm and \$240 to the town for copies of documents pertaining to the town's water and sewage treatment facilities since 1992.

In her response to the association's request, clerk Christine Groulx referred to the legal action the town is facing. The Ontario environment ministry has taken the town to court, alleging its sewage plant contravenes provincial regulations. Certain documents pertaining to the case are held by the town's lawyers, Ottawa-based Vice Hunter Labrosse. To get copies of the estimated 700 pages of the papers, the association would be expected to pay \$195 an hour, a total of \$561 when photocopies are included.

Also, Groulx related that the town staff would require eight hours to research and prepare other documents at the town hall. The \$240 bill, which would not include the photocopy charges, would cover the expense of going through three drawers full of dossiers from 1999 to 2007 and to find the other files from 1992 to 1998.



Jean Jolicoeur

The association says it is astounded and puzzled by the proposed fees, commenting that it cannot understand why the municipality did not retain the documents that were central to its defence.

Association president Jean Jolicoeur complains that the municipality has made a habit of turning over documents to lawyers. Thus, when requests for access are received, solicitor-client privilege can be cited to deny citizens access to information, observes Jolicoeur.

All the council members had preached transparency during the 2006 municipal election campaign, he recalls. That pledge rings hollow when citizens are faced with a \$195 search fee, says Jolicoeur.