

Intelligence MEMOS



From: Zachary Spicer

To: City Councils Across Canada

Date: November 30th, 2016

Re: **THE DREADFUL CONDITIONS OF MUNICIPAL BUDGETS**

In their recent report, [*Two Sets of Books at City Hall? Grading the Finance Reports of Canada's Cities*](#), Benjamin Dachis, William B.P. Robson and Jennifer Y. Tsao argue that many of the annual budgets in Canada's cities are in dreadful condition – key activities are excluded, inconsistent accounting is utilized, crucial numbers are often buried.

What Dachis, Robson and Tsao highlight is a very real problem in Canada's cities that often extends far beyond budgeting. Many municipalities in Canada are facing an accountability and transparency crisis. Far too much information in local government is not made publicly available. Information that is made public is often unintelligible or almost seemingly designed to not be useful, like much of the budget information that Dachis, Robson and Tsao encountered.

A simple search of many municipal websites can confirm this – documentation is out of date, important forms and reports are missing, and finding even simple information about governance or services is frustratingly challenging. Retrieving information that is not publicly available is also a long and tedious process. Individuals often need to resort to filing Freedom of Information (FOI) requests for even basic information about local government. Taking this route, however, is a potentially costly and time consuming exercise, where municipalities can – and unfortunately often do – charge hundreds or thousands of dollars for documentation that should already be public.

It does not have to be this way. Municipalities should seriously consider the following:

- Municipal websites should be designed to be user-friendly. Information should be easy to retrieve.
- Municipalities should set clear internal guidelines and targets for posting timely documentation, such as council and committee agendas and minutes.
- If a municipal website is changed or redesigned, efforts should be made to ensure information previously available is updated
- Municipalities should make it clear how citizens can get in touch with not only council, but also staff. The contact information for key staff members should be on municipal websites.
- Efforts should be made to use the FOI process as a last resort, not a first step, when information is requested. If information is easily accessible, efforts should be made to have it transferred without cost
- Municipalities ought to more seriously consider fee waivers in the FOI process
- Municipalities should more frequently waive fees to initiate the FOI process. While these fees are largely nominal, they do present a financial barrier for some residents

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, all documentation that does not involve sensitive personal information or relate to municipal labour contracts or practices should be considered public and made publicly accessible by default. If documentation cannot be made publicly available, municipalities should provide clear rationale for as to why. Whether it is budget information, planning documents or council agendas, citizens have a right to government documentation that is clear and accessible.

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