PROPOSED TEMPLATE FOR COUNCIL CONSIDERATION

Proposed Council Motion

Prepared by Valley Journalism Project ·
https://valleyjournalismproject.ca/council-motion

This is a proposed template for municipal councils to consider and adapt. Municipal staff should confirm the wording against applicable contracts, procurement rules, and public notice requirements.

Discontinuing Discretionary Municipal Advertising

WHEREAS Council is responsible for ensuring that municipal advertising expenditures serve a clear public purpose and represent responsible use of taxpayer funds;

AND WHEREAS public confidence in municipal government and independent journalism depends on avoiding both improper influence and the reasonable appearance of improper influence;

AND WHEREAS municipal advertising creates a financial relationship between the municipality and publications reporting on its decisions, elected officials, and administration;

AND WHEREAS the Quebec Superior Court found David Leonardo and his company liable for defamation arising from articles published in the St-Lambert Journal, and documented repeated failures to meet journalistic standards;

AND WHEREAS the publisher’s documented history in Quebec, together with concerns raised about journalistic standards in his Ontario publications, creates a reasonable concern about the appearance of municipal advertising revenue influencing coverage;

AND WHEREAS Council wishes to avoid that appearance by directing discretionary advertising expenditures to other suitable communication channels;

NOW THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED THAT Council directs staff to:

1. Immediately cease purchasing or authorizing new discretionary advertising in the Smiths Falls Record Journal, Perth Courier Journal, and Carleton Place Journal, including their print editions, websites, supplements, and associated advertising products, whether purchased directly or through an intermediary;
2. Make no new discretionary advertising commitments or renewals involving these publications, and discontinue existing arrangements at the earliest date permitted by their contractual terms;

3 For the purposes of this resolution, treat every paid placement in the named publications as discretionary except a notice that cannot reasonably be delivered through another legally compliant method or qualifying publication. Discretionary advertising includes promotional advertisements, sponsorships, paid municipal information pages, greetings, and optional additions to required notices;

4 Use other legally permitted methods for required notices wherever available. Where newspaper publication is required, use another qualifying publication wherever practicable. Any unavoidable placement in one of the three named publications shall contain only the content and space reasonably necessary to meet the applicable requirement;

5 Publish a record of any continued advertising expenditure in these publications, identifying the publication, date, purpose, cost, and specific legal requirement or existing contractual obligation supporting the expenditure;

6 Maintain accessible municipal communications through other suitable channels, including options for residents who do not use the internet; and

7 Report to Council within 60 days on implementation, any outstanding contractual commitments, and any amendments needed to municipal advertising, procurement, or public notice policies.

AND THAT this direction apply to all municipal departments and advertising purchased on the municipality’s behalf.

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Background and Supporting Material

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Purpose

This brief supports a proposal to discontinue discretionary municipal advertising in the Smiths Falls Record Journal, Perth Courier Journal, and Carleton Place Journal.

The central concern is the appearance of municipal advertising revenue influencing coverage of the municipality, its administration, or its elected officials. Council is being asked to address that concern through its spending decisions while maintaining effective public communications and meeting all legal notice requirements.

Why the financial relationship matters

Municipalities are both subjects of local reporting and purchasers of newspaper advertising. Residents should be able to trust that municipal advertising purchases serve their information needs, and that reporting is independent of the financial support provided by the municipality.

Municipal advertising should never reward favourable reporting or punish criticism. Decisions should rest on documented public-interest considerations and clear communication needs. The proposed motion should therefore be considered alongside the historical record and the specific Ontario material identified below.

The documented Quebec record

In Ville de Saint-Lambert c. Les Publications Léonardo ltée, 2017 QCCS 1104, the Quebec Superior Court found David Leonardo and his company liable for defamatory reporting and awarded $130,000 in damages.

At paragraph 278, the court found that the defendants had placed themselves at the unconditional and almost exclusive service of local politician Alain Dépatie, and that their municipal reporting lacked balance and accuracy. These findings concerned the St-Lambert Journal.

The judgment also records changes in municipal advertising expenditures. After reviewing publication costs in 2010, Saint-Lambert began using other newspapers. Following Dépatie’s election as mayor in November 2013, spending with the Journal resumed; in 2014, the municipality returned to using it exclusively.

These events provide relevant context for examining the financial relationship, but do not establish an agreement to exchange advertising for favourable coverage.

Read the Quebec Superior Court judgment, paragraphs 47–49 and 278: https://canadianmedialawyers.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Ville_de_Saint-Lambert_c_Les_Publications_Leonardo_ltee_2017_QCCS_1104.pdf

An earlier Quebec Press Council decision concerning the Hampstead Journal, where Leonardo was publisher, directly addressed municipal advertising and editorial independence. The Council identified troubling indications involving changes in municipal advertising and coverage, while stopping short of conclusively establishing the alleged pressure.

It also emphasized the responsibilities of both municipalities and newspapers to keep advertising decisions and editorial judgments independent.

Read Quebec Press Council decision D1986-06-028: https://conseildepresse.qc.ca/decisions/d1986-06-028/

Current concerns in Ontario

The Valley Journalism Project's Smiths Falls case study presents ten complete issues of the Smiths Falls Record Journal, dated August 19 through October 28, 2026, with references to selected election coverage and municipal advertising.

According to the project's review:

- Eight of the ten issues contained a full page of Town of Smiths Falls advertising or municipal content.
- The October 7 issue contained separate profiles of Christopher Cummings and Peter McKenna, while Nate Morris did not receive a separate profile in that issue.
- The September 30 issue prominently presented potential costs associated with Morris's proposed dismissal of the CAO. The project questions the balance between that discussion and the presentation of Morris's supporting case.
- The October 21 Morris profile included an unattributed characterization of his position as a personal vendetta.

These examples raise questions about balance, sourcing, prominence, and framing. They are presented as the project's concerns for council and independent reviewers to assess. The complete issues are available so that the selected examples can be examined in context.

The sample does not establish that municipal advertising influenced editorial decisions. It also does not establish how the Perth or Carleton Place newspapers covered their respective municipalities. Its relevance is that it supplies current

Ontario material to consider alongside the publisher’s documented history.

Review the Smiths Falls case study and complete newspaper issues: https://valleyjournalismproject.ca/smiths-falls-case-study

Why discontinue discretionary advertising

The proposed policy response is to remove the discretionary financial relationship that gives rise to the appearance of influence.

Ending these purchases would allow the municipality to communicate through other suitable channels while reducing questions about whether public advertising expenditures and editorial treatment are connected. The decision should stand independently of whether subsequent coverage praises or criticizes council.

Implementation and accountability

The motion preserves existing contractual obligations until they can lawfully be discontinued and provides a narrow exception for unavoidable legal notices. It also requires disclosure of continued expenditures and a report within 60 days.

Before implementation, staff should identify alternative channels, assess their reach and accessibility, and confirm the applicable notice requirements. Ontario’s municipal guidance identifies procurement, public notice, accountability, and transparency as matters requiring municipal policies.

Ontario Municipal Councillor’s Guide: Accountability and Transparency: https://www.ontario.ca/document/ontario-municipal-councillors-guide/2-accountability-and-transparency