PROPOSED TEMPLATE FOR COUNCIL CONSIDERATION

Background and Supporting Material

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

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