



Cunningham Swan

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CONFIDENTIAL

December 9, 2025

SENT BY EMAIL TO: rzanussi@ramara.ca

Township of Ramara
c/o Rebecca Zanussi, Executive Assistant
2297 Hwy 12
P.O. Box 130
Brechtin, ON
L0K 1B0

Dear Council:

RE: Code of Conduct Complaint – Final Report
Our File No. 37629-31

Please be advised that our Investigation under the Code of Conduct is now complete. We attach the final report herewith and the report should now be circulated to members of the Council.

This investigation is hereby closed.

Sincerely,

Cunningham, Swan, Carty, Little & Bonham LLP

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Dear Council:

**RE: Code of Conduct Complaint – Final Report – Councillor Sherri Bell
Our File No. 37629-31**

This public report of our investigation is being provided to Council in accordance with Section 223.6(1) of the *Municipal Act*. We note that Section 223.6(3) of the *Municipal Act* requires that Council make the report public. The Clerk should identify on the agenda for the next open session Council meeting that this report will be discussed. Staff should consider whether it is appropriate to place the full report on the agenda in advance of Council deciding how the report should otherwise be made public.

Should Council desire, the Integrity Commissioner is prepared to attend virtually at the open session meeting to present the report and answer any questions from Council.

At the meeting, Council must first receive the report for information. The only decision Council is afforded under the *Municipal Act* is to decide how the report will be made public, and whether to adopt any recommendations made by the Integrity Commissioner. Council does not have the authority to alter the findings of the report, only consider the recommendations.

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The Integrity Commissioner has included only the information in this report that is necessary to understand the findings. In making decisions about what information to include, the Integrity Commissioner is guided by the duties set out in the *Municipal Act*. Members of Council are also reminded that Council has assigned to the Integrity Commissioner the duty to conduct investigations in response to complaints under the Code of Conduct, and that the Integrity Commissioner is bound by the statutory framework to undertake a thorough process in an independent manner. The findings of this report represent the Integrity Commissioner's final decision in this matter.

Timeline of Investigation

The key dates and events during the course of this investigation are as follows:

- October 15, 2025, complaint received;
- October 28, 2025, preliminary review conducted;
- October 29, 2025, additional information requested from complainant;
- October 30, 2025, complaint package sent to Member;
- November 21, 2025, response from Member received;
- November 26, 2025, interview witness;
- November 27, 2025, interview witness;
- December 5, 2025, receive additional information from staff.

Complaint Overview

A Complaint was received on October 15, 2025. The Complaint alleged breaches of the Code of Conduct by Councillor Sherri Bell (the "Member").

The complaint alleged that at a Council meeting on September 22, 2025, the Member called the Mayor a "jerk" and a "f***ing jerk". The comments were not made while the Member's microphone was turned on, but were heard by another Councillor.

The complaint also alleged that after the meeting the Member made a post to social media that contained untrue statements. The statements at issue include:

"Councillor Gough breached procedure by calling a point of order to silence me. Point of order isn't for suppressing a voice stating what's uncomfortable to hear, it's for when "a rule of order or procedure has been breached".

"While Council did determine to request a Delegation related to HSWS [Health and Safety Water Stream], Mayor Clarke's claim the projects to be included were discussed at a meeting of Council is unsupported by Agendas or minutes – it didn't happen."

“CAO Jackson’s rephrasing further implies prior Council direction, a smoke and mirrors tactic to deflect from the absent discussion and evade equity concerns. The claim was inaccurate and prioritized obfuscation over transparency risking erosion of public trust.”

“Since fall 2023, my water and sewer advocacy has faced gavel smashes, muted mics and roadblocks. In early 2024 incivility became sanctions without findings and since I’ve suffered relentless harassment. This is not democracy.”

Code of Conduct

The following provisions of the Code of Conduct are relevant to our findings in this investigation:

5.1 Members are responsible for making honest statements. No member shall make a statement when they know that statement is false. No member shall make a statement with the intent to mislead Council, staff or members of the public.

5.3 Members will conduct their dealings with each other in ways that maintain public confidence in the office to which they have been elected, are open and honest, focus on issues rather than personalities, and shall avoid aggressive, offensive or abusive conduct.

5.13 Members of Council:

...

(f) May not make statements known to be false or make a statement with the intent to mislead Council, staff or the public.

18.1 Members shall conduct themselves in a civil manner with decorum at Council, Committee and other meetings in accordance with the provisions of the Township of Ramara’s Procedural By-law, this Code, and other applicable laws as amended from time to time

Investigation Process

In conducting the investigation, the Integrity Commissioner watched the September 22, 2025, Council meeting recording. The complainant and witnesses were interviewed, and relevant publicly available records of Council decisions were reviewed.

The Member made written submissions in response to the complaint, which were considered and formed part of the investigation.

The Member denied the allegations.

The Member, through her paralegal, also alleged that the Member was denied the ability to meaningfully respond to the complaint, firstly because the Council meeting recording was not provided, and secondly because the allegation related to the Facebook post did not set out what, exactly, was alleged to be a lie.

The Integrity Commissioner considered these objections as a preliminary matter and finds as follows:

- (i) The date of the Council meeting was provided to the Member. The meeting was recorded, and that recording is a public document – the recording need not be provided separately to enable the Member to view it as part of her response;
- (ii) The complaint is clear that the recording of the September 22 meeting did not pick up the alleged comments – rendering the video of very limited relevance;
- (iii) The complaint included an excerpt from the Facebook post that formed the basis of the complaint. The complainant characterized the Facebook post as containing lies and untruths. The excerpt from the Facebook post at issue was available to the Member and she was able to respond to the allegation fully.

Findings

September 22, 2025 meeting

The Integrity Commissioner has competing evidence in this matter as to whether the Member made the statements attributed to her. Based on the evidence available and witness testimony the Integrity Commissioner finds that, on a balance of probabilities, it is more likely than not that the Member called the mayor a “jerk” and a “f***ing jerk”.

In making this finding, the Integrity Commissioner relies on the following:

- firsthand witness testimony of a Councillor who heard the Member insult the Mayor
- the recording of the September 22, 2025, Committee of the Whole/Council meeting shows that:
 - o during Committee of the Whole debate about shore wall amendments, the Mayor curtailed the Member’s comments, and an exchange occurred between the Member and the Mayor about whether the Member could continue.
 - o during the Council discussion about the consent agenda, the Member raised questions about expenditures for sewer projects. Councillor Gough attempted to raise a point of order. The Member continued to speak, and the Mayor advised her four times that there was a point of order on the floor as she continued to talk. The Mayor was required to gavel the Member to be silent and allow the point of order to be raised. The Member responded, “don’t talk at me like I was a child” and “I don’t need to be spoken to that way”. The Mayor then advised the Member that if she caused another outburst that she would be removed. Councillor Gough raised his point of order to say, “the

Member keeps on trying to segregate, we have one sewer system”. The Member responded that she was not segregating at all and then started arguing with Councillor Gough. At this point, the Mayor directed the Member to leave the meeting and be prepared to apologize at the next meeting. The Member replied with a number of statements that were impolite, but none of which included an insult towards the Mayor. After the Member left, the Mayor ruled that the point of order was upheld and explained the nature of the grant application.

- The nature of the exchanges between the Mayor and the Member supports a finding that it is more likely than not that the Member made the impugned statements. Such statements would not be out of context with the tenor of the exchanges that occurred.

Facebook Post

At the September 22, 2025, meeting, after the Member was ordered to leave the meeting, CAO Jackson clarified the history of the infrastructure grant applied for and confirmed that Council had previously asked staff to apply for a delegation at AMO regarding the grant. CAO Jackson then confirmed that grants are applied for to benefit infrastructure generally, and not to benefit individuals.

Analysis

Based on the factual finding above that the Member called the mayor a “jerk” and a “f***ing jerk”, the Integrity Commissioner finds that the Member breached sections 5.3 and 18.1. This language is offensive and falls below the standard of decorum expected at a Council meeting.

The Facebook post written after the September 22, 2025, meeting contained statements that were not truthful and were misleading to the public.

The statement that Councillor Gough, “breached procedure by calling a point of order to silence me” is untrue. After the Member was ejected from the meeting the Chair ruled on the point of order and sustained it. Given the ruling of the Chair, the point of order was not a breach of procedure. The recording of the meeting captured this decision of the Chair and therefore it was misleading to make the statement without acknowledging the decision of the Chair.

The statement that “Mayor Clarke’s claim the projects to be included were discussed at a meeting of Council is unsupported by Agendas or minutes – it didn’t happen.” is untrue. Council received report # AD-11-25 at the May 26, 2025, Council meeting. This report confirmed that Council approved a delegation topic at the AMO Conference on the Health and Safety Water Stream grant at the May 12, 2025, meeting. At the May 26 meeting, Council passed Resolution # CW.53.25 to confirm the Health and Safety Water Stream grant was an AMO topic for a delegation – to advocate for the grant submitted by the Township. In July of 2025, staff provided Council with a memo to update Council about the grant application, which included specific projects.

The statement, “CAO Jackson’s rephrasing further implies prior Council direction, a smoke and mirrors tactic to deflect from the absent discussion and evade equity concerns. The claim was inaccurate and prioritized obfuscation over transparency risking erosion of public trust.”

CAO Jackson confirmed that her intent in providing the information she did to Council at the end of the September 22, 2025, meeting was to clarify for Council and the public how grant funding is used by the Township. CAO Jackson wanted to ensure that members of the public understood that grants are applied for by the Township to benefit the Township’s infrastructure, and not to benefit individuals. If the grant application was successful, the money received would reduce capital expenditures on the system, and that capital cost reduction would help to keep user fees lower, but those fees are paid by all users of the system, not just those users of the portion of the system that is subject to the grant.

The Member’s characterization of CAO Jackson’s comments were not correct based on the evidence before the Integrity Commissioner.

The statement, “Since fall 2023, my water and sewer advocacy has faced gavel smashes, muted mics and roadblocks. In early 2024 incivility became sanctions without findings and since I’ve suffered relentless harassment. This is not democracy.” is a statement of opinion and can neither be proven nor disproven, as it is the Member’s perception. The complainant did not take issue with whether the statement was uncivil or disparaging and as such the Integrity Commissioner makes no finding on those aspects of the statement.

The Integrity Commissioner finds that the statements, as discussed above, were not truthful and therefore breached sections 5.1 and 5.13.

After determining that the statements insulting the Mayor and the untruthful statements discussed above were made, the Integrity Commissioner is then tasked with balancing the Member’s right to freedom of expression as guaranteed under the Charter, with the objectives and purpose of the Code of Conduct. The integrity Commissioner has undertaken this analysis in previous reports, but is required to consider the statements at issue for each Code of Conduct complaint.

The protection afforded to political expression is high and any infringement on that right must be justified.

Insulting the Mayor is not a form of expression that attracts significant protection. The Code of Conduct includes a statement of principles which reads, “These standards are intended to enhance public confidence that the Township of Ramara’s elected and appointed officials operate from a basis of integrity, justice and courtesy.” On balance, the Integrity Commissioner finds that any limitation on the Member’s freedom of expression to insult other members of Council is proportionate and justified.

With respect to the limitations on the Member's statements found to be untrue, as in our previous report in Matter 27, the Integrity Commissioner considered the factors set out in Doré/Loyola and adopts that analysis here.

The prohibition against making false statement or intentionally misleading others seeks to protect the integrity of Council's role and of political debate. The public puts its trust in members of Council, and the Code of Conduct requires that those members do not knowingly or intentionally abuse that trust. In this case, the Member accused other members of Council of lying to the public. Where the accusation of lying is itself untrue, the public have a right to know which of their elected representatives are being truthful. Being able to trust their elected representatives is an important value that deserves the protection of the Code of Conduct and is a value sufficient to permit a limited restriction on the freedom of expression.

After considering and weighing the competing values, the Integrity Commissioner concludes that, in the present circumstances, a finding that the Member breached the Code is a reasonable infringement on her right to freedom of expression protected by the *Charter*.

Recommendation

The Integrity Commissioner recommends that Council impose a suspension of remuneration of 10 days for the breach of sections 5.3 and 18.1 for insulting the Mayor.

The Integrity Commissioner recommends that Council impose a suspension of remuneration of 40 days for the breach of sections 5.1 and 5.13 for making statement that were untrue.

Sincerely,

Cunningham, Swan, Carty, Little & Bonham LLP



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