

Governance, Finance and Civic Engagement Committee

Niagara-on-the-Lake Residents Association (NOTLRA)

Draft Meeting Minutes

Date: Friday, May 22, 2026

Time: 2:00 p.m. – 3:30 p.m.

Location: Board Room, Community Centre

1. Call to Order, Attendance, Approval of Agenda and Minutes

Chair Alan Young called the meeting to order at approximately 2:00 p.m. and welcomed members and guests.

Present

- Alan Young (Chair)
- Stuart McCormack
- Tony Varga
- Bette Ann James
- Caroline Polgrabia
- Patrick Gedge
- Kai Wiens

Regrets

- Terry Davis
- Bob Bader (expected late due to funeral attendance)

Approval of Agenda

Moved and seconded that the agenda be approved.

Carried.

Approval of Minutes – May 8, 2026

Moved and seconded that the minutes of May 8, 2026 be approved.
Carried.

Introduction of New Members

Kai Wiens and Patrick Gedge introduced themselves and provided background information regarding their professional and community experience. Other committee members also briefly introduced themselves.

2. Election Countdown & Key Dates Recap

The Chair reviewed the upcoming municipal election timeline, including:

- Nominations opened May 1, 2026
- Nomination deadline: August 21, 2026
- Election Day: October 26, 2026

Discussion focused on the importance of informing residents and encouraging engagement and voter participation.

3. Resident Survey Update

The committee noted:

- The election website had officially launched during the week.
- A minor issue with question sequencing in the survey was being corrected.
- The survey distribution was expected shortly following revisions.

Members congratulated Norm Arsenault and others involved in the website launch.

4. Position Paper on Downsizing Council & Dissemination Strategy

The committee reviewed Stuart McCormack's revised position paper regarding the reduction in Council size and the procedural circumstances surrounding the March 24, 2026 Council meeting.

Discussion included:

- Concerns regarding transparency and public notice.
- The use of an “information report” to introduce a substantive motion.
- The importance of tying the issue to broader themes of governance and transparency.
- Dissemination strategies including:
 - NOTLRA membership email distribution
 - Posting on the NOTLRA and election websites
 - Social media distribution
 - Submission to local media and newsletters
 - Possible Letter to the Editor format

Caroline Polgrabia recommended linking the paper to the organization’s broader governance and transparency messaging framework rather than presenting it solely as a complaint. Members generally agreed.

The committee also discussed:

- Civic Searchlight as a source for searchable municipal meeting transcripts.
- Broader concerns regarding public awareness and procedural accountability.

Direction

- Stuart McCormack to revise the paper to further emphasize governance and transparency themes.
- Norm Arsenault to post materials on the website.
- Bette Ann James to coordinate social media distribution.
- Stuart McCormack to submit the article to local media outlets.

5. Strong Mayor Powers – Public Awareness Strategy

The committee discussed the implications of Ontario’s strong mayor powers legislation and its interaction with a reduced Council size.

Key themes included:

- Increased concentration of decision-making authority.
- Reduced checks and balances.
- Potential chilling effects on municipal staff and administration.
- Concerns regarding democratic accountability.
- The need to inform residents about the practical implications of strong mayor powers.

Members discussed:

- Developing simplified educational messaging.
- Use of visuals and cartoons to explain the issue.

- Potential campaign themes including “No Kings.”
- Incorporating questions regarding strong mayor powers into future candidate forums.
- Possible candidate pledges respecting use of strong mayor powers.
- All members to consider timing of release issue

Discussion also referenced:

- The relationship between strong mayor powers and planning approvals.
- Concerns regarding public understanding of the issue.
- Timing considerations for launching public communications closer to the election period.

Direction

- Stuart McCormack to develop a draft visual/cartoon concept regarding strong mayor powers.
- Committee to revisit timing and communications strategy at the June meeting.
- Strong mayor powers questions to be added to the candidate forum question bank.

Additional Research Item

Caroline Polgrabia agreed to research and circulate a summary regarding “lame duck” Council provisions under the Municipal Act and election legislation.

6. Candidate Engagement Plan Update

Bette Ann James provided an update regarding planning for candidate information sessions.

Key points:

- Crossroads Public School remains the preferred venue.
- Insurance documentation remains outstanding.
- The venue booking process is proceeding through the District School Board of Niagara.
- The auditorium capacity is approximately 800 attendees.
- Sessions are tentatively planned for September 2026.
- Advance voting timelines are being considered in scheduling.

Members discussed:

- Recording and archiving candidate responses for the election website.
 - Segmenting videos by candidate.
 - The importance of obtaining clear and substantive responses from candidates.
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7. Candidate Engagement Scorecard

The committee revisited the proposal to create a single candidate evaluation scorecard for public use at candidate sessions.

Discussion included:

- Existing draft scorecards previously circulated.
- Use of broad competency categories.
- Public use as an individual evaluation tool rather than formal NOTLRA scoring.

Direction

- Stuart McCormack and Norm Arsenault to collaborate on a consolidated draft scorecard for committee review.
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8. Campaign Button / Promotional Materials Discussion

The committee reviewed mock-up concepts for campaign buttons and related materials.

Discussion included:

- “Residents First” as a central messaging theme.
- Potential modular messaging:
 - “Agriculture First”
 - Resident-focused governance themes
- Possibility of:
 - Buttons
 - Window decals
 - Magnets
 - T-shirts
 - QR codes linking to the election website

Members discussed the importance of:

- Simple and consistent messaging.
- Public visibility.
- Driving traffic to the election website.

Direction

- Bette Ann James to research options and costs for promotional materials and report back.

9. Municipal Finance / Infrastructure Workstream

Stuart McCormack and Tony Varga advised that:

- Preliminary financial materials had been exchanged.
- A separate strategy session would be scheduled to identify priority financial and infrastructure themes.

Discussion touched on:

- Municipal reserve levels
- Tourism-related revenues
- Tax increases
- Infrastructure spending
- Legal costs
- Resident affordability concerns

10. Chair for June Meeting

As Alan Young will be unavailable:

- June 5 meeting will not proceed.
- Stuart McCormack agreed to chair the June 12 meeting.

11. Summer Meeting Format

The committee discussed maintaining the biweekly meeting schedule over the summer.

Discussion included:

- Hybrid and virtual meeting options.
- Flexibility for members travelling during the summer.
- Continued need for momentum leading into the election period.

Consensus emerged to:

- Continue meeting every two weeks.
- Determine on a meeting-by-meeting basis whether sessions would be in-person or virtual.

12. Adjournment

Moved and seconded that the meeting adjourn.

Carried.

The meeting adjourned at approximately 3:30 p.m.

Action Items Summary

Item	Action	Responsible	Timing
1	Revise Council downsizing paper to strengthen governance/transparency framing	Stuart McCormack	Before next circulation
2	Post downsizing article/material on website	Norm Arsenault	Pending revisions
3	Coordinate social media dissemination of article	Bette Ann James	Following publication
4	Submit article to local media outlets	Stuart McCormack	Upcoming
5	Research and circulate summary of “lame duck” Council rules	Caroline Polgrabia	Before next meeting
6	Develop draft cartoon/visual regarding strong mayor powers	Stuart McCormack	June meeting
7	Add strong mayor powers questions to candidate forum question bank	Alan Young / Committee	Ongoing
8	Follow up regarding insurance and Crossroads booking	Bette Ann James / Norm Arsenault	Ongoing
9	Prepare consolidated candidate scorecard draft	Stuart McCormack & Norm Arsenault	Next committee review

Item	Action	Responsible	Timing
10	Research promotional material options and pricing	Bette Ann James	Next meeting
11	Schedule finance/infrastructure strategy session	Stuart McCormack & Tony Varga	Before next report
12	Chair June 12 committee meeting	Stuart McCormack	June 12, 2026