

Enhancing Access to Information: RD/AD Success Stories

**A Joint Project of the
Information and Privacy Commissioner/Ontario
and the
Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Office,
Public Access Services Branch of
Management Board Secretariat**

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Acknowledgement

The IPC and MBS are most grateful to the participants below who gave generously of their time and expertise in providing their stories to the working group for this report. We congratulate their organizations, who are leading by example.

We also acknowledge that there are many other organizations with access success stories that are not captured in this report. To each of these organizations, who are also enabling more open government through routine disclosure and active dissemination, we extend an open invitation to you to let us know of your ideas and strategies.

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Foreword

As the financial resources available to government organizations continue to decline, fresh approaches in the administration of programs and services are critical. Freedom of information (FOI) is no exception. There are straightforward and inexpensive approaches that can contribute to a vibrant, cost-effective freedom of information system. Adopting a “culture of openness” through the routine disclosure and active dissemination (RD/AD) of general records is one approach that advances open government and makes access to information better, quicker and cheaper. Ultimately the real benefit is that RD/AD practices can engender a more open relationship between government organizations and the public they serve.

We believe that success in the shift from passive disclosure (responding to FOI requests) to active disclosure requires at least three key ingredients: leadership that demonstrates an ongoing dedication and commitment to advancing open government; inclusion of RD/AD as part of an organization-wide access strategy in strategic plans; and true empowerment of front-line staff to carry out an active access strategy.

In support of a good access strategy, we also strongly encourage your organization to explore multiple or alternate formats for the release of information so that it is truly accessible to all. Over time, the increasing supply and demand for on-line public access to government-held information will create challenges in determining how to organize these electronic systems. But the bottom line still needs to be that no single format can adequately support the basis of Ontario’s access scheme — only with variety, choice, and flexibility in the delivery and format of information products, can access be nurtured.

Eleven access success stories form this report. Each story demonstrates that a successful access strategy using RD/AD *can* be done with minimal resources yet achieve maximum positive benefits for the public and for the staff who are involved in FOI.

Accountability to the public is a fundamental purpose of the freedom of information system in Ontario. With accountability as our collective beacon, we hope that you will read these stories and see new proactive ways for your organization to release and disseminate information that will inform your public. Although your organization may be different in size, mandate and structure from those involved in the access success stories in this report, we hope that you will see opportunities and ideas that can be adapted or even transferred directly to your organization’s operation.

Without question, there are many more examples that have not been captured in this report. For those organizations who have ideas and strategies that enable more open government through RD/AD, we would like to hear from you. Please contact the Information and Privacy Commissioner/Ontario at 416-326-3333 or toll free at 1-800-387-0073.

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The Working Group

A Working Group has produced this report. We would like to acknowledge and thank the Working Group for the time they have given to this project, and for sharing their experience, ideas and insights. Thank you to:

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Liquor Control Board of Ontario
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Background

In April 1994, the Information and Privacy Commissioner/Ontario (IPC) and the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Office in the Public Access Services Branch at Management Board Secretariat (MBS) jointly released *Routine Disclosure and Active Dissemination* (RD/AD). Done in conjunction with a Working Group, this report outlined the advantages to government-promoted RD/AD and prescribed eight specific practices to assist Freedom of Information and Privacy Co-ordinators (Co-ordinators) in determining which records could be classified as being subject to a routine release and an active dissemination strategy.

As defined in the April 1994 report and continuing in this report, routine disclosure and active dissemination carry the following meanings:

Routine disclosure (RD): occurs when a request for a general record can be granted routinely either inside or outside of the formal access process prescribed by the *Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act* (the provincial *Act*) or the *Municipal Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act* (the municipal *Act*).

Active dissemination (AD): occurs when information or records are periodically released (without any request) pursuant to a specific strategy for release of information.

Since the release of that report, feedback has indicated that access practitioners are very much interested in concrete everyday examples of how government organizations are bringing RD/AD to life; basically, practitioners want to know who is doing what and how they are doing it.

In response to this interest and the ongoing desire of the IPC and MBS to further encourage RD/AD, a working group was again struck to guide a process that would produce a report on “access success stories”. The Working Group was established in May 1995 to carry out the project and met four times over the period of June to November 1995.

The objectives of the project were to:

- solicit from institutions covered by the municipal *Act* and the provincial *Act*, successful RD/AD stories;
- assemble these stories into a report and disseminate it to government institutions;
- promote and encourage RD/AD practices; and
- further entrench RD/AD into Ontario’s access scheme.

Methodology

The process to obtain the success stories was informal. The guidance of the Working Group, word-of-mouth, and an announcement in MBS's *Fast Notes* yielded a list of government organizations that we thought could provide potential success stories. Once the list was compiled, an interview questionnaire was devised by the Working Group. Contact was then made with the government organizations to arrange for an interview. Eleven interviews took place from July to November 1995 and were done either on the telephone or in person.

The interviewees were Co-ordinators, Record Managers and one was a Public Affairs Officer. The interview questionnaire was used as a guide to solicit information from the interviewee. After the interviews were completed, the stories were written, reviewed by the Working Group, and sent to the interviewees for their comments and permission to include their story in the report.

Toward “A Culture of Openness”: A Summary of RD/AD Tips

Some general tips for doing RD/AD have been assembled and summarized below. These tips came from the organizations whose personnel were interviewed, as well as from members of the Working Group.

The tips give some practical ideas on how RD/AD can be entrenched into the day-to-day operations of your organization and help to foster a culture of openness. An essential first step is solid, demonstrated, and unwavering commitment from the organization’s Head to make access an integral part of strategic objectives.

Sell RD/AD as good basic common sense. It reduces workload and increases efficiency; it is quick and simple because the records can be located almost at one’s fingertips. It may take some time initially, but the payback is significant.

- Decide up-front that RD/AD are key components to a good access strategy. Do regular system-wide reviews to keep increasing the number of documents that can be routinely released.
- Involve staff from all areas of your organization in the development of an access strategy.
- Be access-conscious when designing forms. For example, where possible, design two-sided forms with releasable information on one side and personal information on the other side — the releasable information side can then be easily photocopied without severing the personal information.
- Study, examine and review FOI requests. Identify trends. Look for clues. Observe the patterns and identify records that can be routinely disclosed rather than released through the FOI process.
- Employ good records management practices. Classify existing records and new records with an RD/AD designation as part of the retention schedule and the procedural guidelines of your organization.
- Use training situations as an opportunity for staff to identify areas where information can be routinely disclosed or actively disseminated.
- Dispel myths and reduce the fear about making information routinely available, through ongoing staff awareness, orientation, training and education.
- Think about “partnering” with a colleague/counterpart in another government organization so that you can regularly share ideas and gain from each other’s experience/expertise.

The Access Success Stories

Each story is unique, yet several common key elements necessary to carry out successful access practices are shared across the organizations. The most striking common element was that over and over again, interviewees stressed the importance of a “positive access mind-set” or a “corporate-wide attitude of openness”. The interviewees also reinforced that the genesis of their “culture of openness” was borne by strong leadership within their organization — leadership that endorses positive and active ways to get information out to the public — leadership that supports all the necessary upfront staff time that may be needed to develop RD/AD strategies and put them into place.

Each story starts with key words or phrases that characterize the RD/AD activity and also included is the name, address and contact information of the government organization.

Philosophy of openness; staff awareness, education, and training; an “open phone policy”; if disclosure is required by another piece of legislation, the record is routinely released; open communication.

Regional Municipality of Waterloo

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“To be as open as possible” permeates the Regional Municipality of Waterloo’s (Waterloo) approach to access. This philosophy prescribes that access to information should be provided to the greatest extent possible, subject to the municipal *Act* and to the policies and procedures of the Municipality. Access to information is seen to be an important aspect of providing service to the public.

As a regional municipality, Waterloo carries out a wide range of programs and services. Because of the nature of these programs and services, it was felt that a direct or specific policy wherein general records are designated as being subject to an RD/AD release would not work as well as an approach that entrenches a mind-set of openness through ongoing learning and education. Through intensive staff awareness and education, Freedom of Information and Privacy (FOIP) staff work at dispelling myths and concerns about how to get information out.

Actively translating the philosophy into a mind-set of openness is incorporated into the day-to-day work life of staff. This is being achieved through several strategies described below.

- Awareness/training sessions, and specialized training sessions on the municipal *Act* for various sectors (e.g., health care workers) within the Municipality are provided to staff on a regular and ongoing basis. About 10 sessions a year are delivered.
- “An open phone policy” — FOIP staff are always available to consult with and advise staff on access to information questions and issues. FOI requests are handled centrally by the FOIP staff located in the Regional Clerk’s Office, Corporate Records and Archives Unit. But, typically, staff will receive enquiries from the public/clients and will contact FOIP staff to determine if the information requested can be routinely released or if it is necessary to follow the FOI route. This ongoing dialogue with FOIP staff creates an internal openness in communication and ongoing incremental learning for staff who are making the enquiries — this approach also empowers staff with continuous knowledge of access to information matters. In 1994 FOIP staff assisted in 125 informal requests, almost double the 68 FOI requests.
- FOIP staff periodically request feedback from other staff to determine how they can improve their services.
- If disclosure is required by another piece of legislation, the record is routinely released.
- The functional locating of FOIP staff within the Corporate Records and Archives Unit is beneficial because these staff well know, where/what/how information is held across the organization.
- Good rapport between FOIP staff and staff in other departments is essential. When a request for information is handled, FOIP staff work inclusively with staff in the responsible department to ensure that they are positively involved in the process. Building a foundation for trust and co-operation through openness and inclusion is a key aspect to managing access to information issues, across the organization.

Proactive approach to further advance open government; FOI trends analysis; records management; training; proactive severing of records; electronic dissemination through a local bulletin board system.

City of Brampton

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The City of Brampton approaches RD/AD in four main ways: (1) FOI trends analysis, (2) records management, (3) training and (4) electronic dissemination through a local bulletin board system called Bramnet.

Proactively looking for ways to further advance open government, through the routine release of information, is the overall operating principle for access to information at the City of Brampton. It is the City's philosophy to give out as much information as possible by encouraging a positive RD/AD attitude across all departments. RD/AD is regarded as a natural boost to providing quick and efficient customer service; it also saves on staff time.

(1) FOI Trends Analysis

Through the process of analysing FOI requests, the City has identified trends that have now led to the routine release of certain documents. Two examples of this are: a pool permit list and an "all permits report" (building permits).

With respect to pool permits, staff identified the trend after analysing numerous FOI requests; then devised a process so the information could be routinely released. Now the City routinely releases lists of addresses of residences that have obtained pool permits (the technical name of a pool permit is a "curb cut permit"). Previously these requests were handled through the FOI process.

The pool permit list came about because the City was experiencing a high demand for these lists and wanted to find an efficient route to respond to the requests. Request by request, the City was consistently releasing the lists. After manually producing the lists and severing the personal information each time a FOI request was made, staff looked for a solution that was less time-consuming but consistent with the municipal *Act*. Following much internal consultation, a releasable electronic database with the list information was devised (with all of the personal information severed).

Similarly, the “all permits report” is a regularly updated report of building permits. It is a list that includes the permit number, the type of work done and the address.

(2) Records Management

RD/AD has become a standard feature of the City’s operating procedures. Through the Corporate File Classification Manual, records management staff in the Clerk’s office are gradually classifying records for RD/AD access and retention. This approach is designed to ensure a long-term commitment to making RD/AD a standard practice for the release of information. It will also set the stage for departmental staff to be proactive in getting information out to the public in a quick and efficient manner while at the same time saving staff time.

(3) Training

Ongoing training sessions on FOI are given by staff in the Clerk’s department. An integral piece and message within these sessions is that the City wants to be continuously progressing on FOI and advancing open government. These sessions are, therefore, constructed to build in a clear message to staff about the importance of understanding the spirit and body of FOI and to cultivate an attitude of openness with concrete actions.

(4) Local Bulletin Board System

A local bulletin board system is now operating in the Brampton area. This system is called Bramnet and is a private service of which the City is a client. It is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week from any home or office computer. Through this medium the City is able to: give easy electronic access to public information for local residents; provide an alternative medium of communication for residents to voice their needs and preferences to City Hall and to other residents; enhance the delivery and awareness of City services and public programs; promote an enhanced sense of community via the provision of an electronic forum for discussing ideas and concerns of residents; and extend to the community the opportunity to understand computer technology.

Bramnet services will facilitate more openness in government. To date, the services to be offered are: electronic mail to City departments, community organizations, and other users; over 250 documents such as the Directory of Records, Council reports/minutes, By-Laws, meeting agendas, staff reports, city events, pets for adoption, bus schedules, and parks/recreation programs; on-line registration for programs and licence renewals; and on-line discussions of any number of topics that could range from public transportation to decisions of Council.

Corporate mind-set of openness; an efficient and easy access process for the public; routine electronic dissemination of information.

City of Waterloo

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The routine electronic dissemination of information is at the heart of the City of Waterloo's approach to making government more open and accessible, and to getting the information out. The City's philosophy on accessing government-held information is that the process should be as efficient and as easy as possible, and widely available to the public.

A corporate mind-set of "openness", in combination with the ingenuity of innovative staff and technology led the City to develop and implement two electronic services: CityFacts and City-Line (BBS).

CityFacts requires a touch-tone telephone and a fax machine, or a personal computer with fax capabilities. By dialing into 519-886-7329, users will reach the City of Waterloo's Fax Information Retrieval System. The index of available documents includes:

- Council Information: Council Organization; How to Be a Delegate; Council Representatives on Boards and Committees
- Council and Committee Agendas
- Council and Committee Meeting Minutes
- Information on City Facilities
- Municipal By-Laws
- Waterloo's Heritage Preserved: Reports on Specific Local Sites
- Property Taxation/Assessment: Multi-Year Tax Bill Information

- Environmental Issues: Alternatives to Pesticides; Stop! That's Not Garbage; Grass Clippings; Blue Box Guidelines; Backyard Composting; Waterloo Recycling Depot Acceptable Materials
- Demographics: Population Information; Growth Strategy — Growth Strategy Sets Guidelines to Control Impact
- Emergency Services Inquiries: Fire Department; Water and Sewer; By-Law Enforcement; Regional Assessment Office
- Property Issues: It's (Y)our Neighbourhood Guide; City of Waterloo Official Plan; Property Standards Complaints; Student Housing; Listing of Reports and Maps Available; Zoning By-Law Information
- Snow Clearing: General Snow Clearing Information
- Fire Safety: Fire Safety Requirements — Candles in Churches, Propane Gas Barbecues. Fire Safety Requirements for Boarding, Lodging and Rooming Houses — Four to Ten Persons and Eleven or More Persons
- Financial Statements: multi-year Consolidated Financial Statements; and Budget Reports
- Programs: Seniors; Transportation; Home Support Services; Community Meals Program; Albert McCormick's Indoor Playground; Fund Raising — A Guide to Community Giving; Fee Assistance Program; Volunteer Services
- Forms: Building — Demolition Tracking Sheet; Building Permits — Application For Permit for Small Residential Construction, Commercial Construction, and for Demolition; Purchasing Bidders List Information Form
- CityFacts: Information on the technology behind CityFacts.

CityLine is a computer bulletin board service operated by the City since 1992. It allows public access to a wide variety of municipal information. Anyone with access to a personal computer, modem and communications software can access the system at 519-884-9566. With extended hours of access, the public is able to get information subject to their schedules and not just the schedule of City Hall.

Information is updated as new documents and bulletins are created. Users are also able to post questions to staff. For security considerations, each user must create and maintain a password, and first-time users are required to enter their names and addresses to register.

The data on the system was selected on the basis of demand with input from staff and is also currently available in paper form. The CityLine also includes information on:

- Council and Committee Agendas and Minutes
- Information on City Facilities
- Environmental Issues
- Financial Statements
- Fire Safety
- Demographics
- Seniors and Volunteer Happenings
- Property Taxation/Assessment
- Snow Clearing.

The City believes that both clients and staff benefit from the electronic services: (1) it is easy and quick to access information which furthers the City's goal to get information out to the public; (2) users can access information at their convenience from home or from work without having to go to City Hall; (3) the information is free; (4) it greatly reduces the time required by staff to serve the public who want information; and, (5) electronic access reduces the amount of paper that is used.

The cost to the City has been minimal; the required software was about \$230 and it costs around \$1,200 a year to maintain — the equivalent of renting two telephone lines. Some staff time is also required for data input and maintenance.

A home page is planned to be released on the World Wide Web on April 29, 1996.

Openness philosophy—mind-set of the importance of making information available; good customer service; flexibility; streamlining the access process; trends analysis; staff training; good communication and staff involvement; World Wide Website.

Liquor Control Board of Ontario (LCBO)

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A corporate focus on customer service and a mind-set focussed on the importance of making information available to the public have motivated the LCBO to streamline the access process. The need to deliver information products quickly to the public and to the client trades, locally and internationally, has shaped the LCBO's philosophy about making information available and easily accessible. This philosophy also requires that the LCBO remain flexible and in tune with client group requests and continue to be improving existing processes. It not only improves efficiencies internally at the LCBO, it also makes good common and good business sense.

After extensive discussions with the internal program areas, staff looked at better ways to get information out. The key to access success here has been good internal communication and liaison, staff involvement, ongoing training and awareness to enable a more efficient process to release information and to entrench an "openness" philosophy. Now, information for release is at staff's fingertips. Both staff and requesters benefit from the efficiency created by routinely releasing documents previously handled through the FOI process. The combination of a positive attitude towards the public's right to know and basic common sense has guided the LCBO in its approach to access.

On a practical level, staff identified many FOI requests for specific reports. After more analysis, it was clear that there was a constant demand for certain reports that were always being released. Since this trend was identified, these records have been routinely made available to the public. Some of these records include:

- LCBO Store, Name and Address Directory
- Ontario Agent List (alpha and numeric)
- Brand and Agent List
- List of Consignment Warehouse Agents

- Merchandising Customer Survey Reports
- Merchandising Studies
- Ontario Agency Store Locations
- Stock Movement Reports (produced monthly)
- Ontario Winery Store Locations.

Trends analysis has also spawned routine access to a variety of customized data products for small companies who are interested in data for very specific aspects of their industry. Clients can call in or walk in off the street and request segments of data reports for example, on stock movement. The LCBO is currently working on establishing processes whereby these reports can be printed on-the-spot by staff and made available at no charge or for a nominal fee.

A resource library on-site at the LCBO head office contains a range of reports, surveys, trade information and is available to anyone wishing to use it.

With a diverse client base all over the world — suppliers, agents, members of the general public, students, and businesses — who want to market a product, the LCBO Home Page Pilot project provides another medium for access to information. The address is: www.lcbo.com. The menu includes the following items:

- About LCBO
- Store Locations
- Products and Services Guide
- Private Ordering
- LCBO Annual Reports
- LCBO News Releases (1994-95) On Canada News Wire
- Vintages Home Page
- Other Related Sites.

One may also access pre-recorded information on store locations and hours, services, regulations, licences and permits, tours of wineries/distillers, alcohol-related problems, and general information by calling the LCBO INFOLINE at 416-365-5900 or the toll free province-wide number at 1-800-668-5226.

Corporate-wide attitude of openness; FOI trends analysis; records management; staff training and awareness.

City of North York

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An attitude of "openness", FOI trends analysis, good records management and staff training/awareness are the fundamental elements of the City's approach to access success.

The City recognizes that the planned routine release of information is a win/win approach that benefits both requesters and staff. It enables good customer service because requesters get the information quickly and staff benefit because less time is spent processing requests.

The routine release of information can become an extremely simplified and efficient process once staff have identified the appropriate records. At the City of North York, analysing FOI requests and identifying repetitive releases of information without exemptions is seen as the fundamental step in getting the information out. Once the records are identified as being subject to an RD/AD release, they are then incorporated into the records retention schedule with a heading that designates the particular record as "routine public access". Thus the RD/AD releasable records become a permanent part of the retention schedule — straightforward and quick.

Ongoing training about the municipal *Act* and about RD/AD have helped staff to employ an "openness" approach and have removed some of the fear attached to the worry of improperly releasing a record. Staff involvement in the process has facilitated good buy-in across departments.

Currently a World Wide Website is being planned and staff are beginning to identify the information that will be on the site.

Corporate philosophy of openness and accountability; School and System Profiles; IPC Order M-27; plan for dissemination of the Profiles.

North York Board of Education

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A strong belief in an open, honest, and accountable approach to communicating with parents and the public has led the North York Board of Education (the Board) to release a massive amount of data that is contained in its annual School and System Profiles. The disclosure of the information is a benchmark achievement.

Unprecedented in Canada, these reports monitor the knowledge and skills of students in the North York public school system in mathematics and literacy, including reading, writing, spelling and grammar. The results of the tests help the Board to plan for improvement in student achievement; the results also help educators and parents determine how well students are meeting the curriculum objectives. But by far the most important aspect is that these published results of the testing program give greater accountability to parents/taxpayers for the performance of students and the whole school system.

In March 1995, parents received a school profile for their child's school. This short, plain language profile included: an overview of the school's programs, facilities, curriculum highlights and other general information; demographic information on students; results from annual board tests in mathematics and literacy and the Ministry of Education and Training's Grade 9 reading and writing test; a standard explanation of the tests; the school's own comments on their test results, including a summary of the school's improvement plans; and a summary of system-wide results so that parents could compare their child's school results, relative to the whole system. Parents also received a short "system profile" that gives the test results and demographic data on a system-wide basis for all schools of the same type. Two other information brochures also accompanied the package to increase understanding and provide a context to the data.

A combination of inter-related factors led up to the decision to break from the tradition of secrecy surrounding school test results and move to a routine release of school-by-school test results:

- Parents' demand for more accountability was escalating.
- The media were critical of school boards for concealing information and for poor accountability to parents.
- Complaints from taxpayers over some school boards charging, in some cases, large "administrative" fees to access school-by-school test results.
- In July 1992, the IPC issued Order M-27. The Board considered this to be a landmark ruling.

In this order the institution (a school board) was ordered to disclose two records which identified particular schools by name. The appellant had requested access to records that showed the standings of the institution's schools in provincial reviews for Grade 11 and 12 physics and chemistry (1987 to 1988) and Grade 9 geography (1986 to 1987); and the results, both school-by-school and board-wide, of all system-wide tests given since 1983 in English, mathematics and science courses for Grades 9 to 12 and Ontario Academic Credits.

The institution granted access to five responsive records, but the records sent to the appellant identified each school not by name, but by an alphabetical code designation. The subject of the appeal was the institution's decision not to identify each school by name.

The institution was ordered to disclose two records which identified the schools by name. The school name and its alphabetical code are not the personal information of any identifiable individual, and it was not reasonable to expect that the economic interests or the competitive position of the institution would be prejudiced by the disclosure of the record.

- The Ministry of Education and Training has indicated that all Ontario school boards will be required to administer province-wide tests by 1997 in at least two, and perhaps four grades, covering mathematics and literacy. The type of tests and how the tests will be reported to parents and the public is yet to be determined.
- After eight years of developing its testing program, the Board was well-positioned to release school-by-school results.

Over several months, the method of reporting school-by-school results was developed through extensive consultation with teachers and principals and focus groups with parents and students. By March 1995, 4,000 teachers had received their school's profile, the system profile for their school type and two companion brochures. Each school received a binder containing the profiles for all 130 schools within the Board. The binders were placed in all North York Public Libraries and distribution to parents was carried out.

FOI trends analysis; customer demands; consumer complaints in the Consumer Services Branch.

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One of the records series the Ministry is working on for routine disclosure is consumer complaints held by the Consumer Services Branch. Consumers who have had a problem with businesses or companies, frequently want to know how many others have also experienced similar problems. The Ministry receives many FOI requests for this information.

The volume of records is huge because the Ministry receives hundreds of thousands of complaints each year. A new computerized information system has not only streamlined the complaint-handling process for staff, but has contributed to the speedier and less costly processing of FOI requests. Recently, when the Branch was doing programming work to improve the efficiency of the system, it analysed some of the various management needs for information retrieval — including situations where there were frequent FOI requests. As a result, the Branch developed some reporting capabilities into the programming that would make searches easier and faster.

Manual searches through this large volume of records would probably be cost-prohibitive for most consumer needs. However, the computer program's reporting capabilities have dramatically reduced both the search time required by staff and, therefore, the cost to requesters. This means that FOI requests are less disruptive to the ongoing work of the Branch and that a requester's information can be processed more quickly.

The computer system gives Ministry management an immediate response to questions relating to trends and developments in marketplace activity while also serving the needs of FOI requesters who want to know the types of complaints that the Ministry has received regarding certain companies or industries. By providing this type of information to FOI requesters in a prompt and efficient manner, the Ministry is helping consumers become more self-sufficient in resolving their consumer disputes. Many consumers use this information in preparing for their own small claims court actions. Others use the information to help their community groups or organizations develop education programs to prevent common consumer difficulties.

Businesses have also made FOI requests for such information in order to help evaluate their own level of consumer satisfaction.

This project has shown that by considering the information needs of FOI requesters when developing information management systems, both management and FOI requesters can get the information products they need — faster, quicker and cheaper.

FOI trends analysis; customer service; streamlining the access process; Property Survey Records.

Town of Richmond Hill

P.O. Box 300, 225 East Beaver Creek Rd.
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Contact Person: Denis Perks, Records Management and Freedom of Information and Privacy Co-ordinator. Telephone 905-771-8800. Fax 905-771-2502.

The Town of Richmond Hill was initially inspired by the City of North York's routine disclosure activities that were described in the 1994 *Routine Disclosure and Active Dissemination Report*.

In deciding which records could be subject to RD/AD, Property Survey Records were quickly identified as a candidate. As these records all related to property, the complete document could be released under the FOI process. However, dealing with a request for such records was time-consuming due to the required paperwork. Having received at least 150 requests a year meant that these took up a considerable amount of time.

The first step was to simplify the labour intensive paperwork process. Then a set fee of \$5 per record was determined; this fee was based on the average preparation and photocopying costs for a survey record and was calculated according to the fee schedules in the municipal *Act*.

Once the fee was set, it was relatively straightforward to standardize and simplify the whole process. A clerk could retrieve, copy and issue a receipt for the document minutes after it was requested.

The Town of Richmond Hill has experienced a positive outcome from this change because now staff time can be focussed where it is more needed. Homeowners and real estate agents are receiving faster service. This has also meant more work for local surveyors especially if their name is on an older survey. Overall, the benefits of the routine release process have made it easy for Council to see that RD/AD is the route to go.

Next, staff are setting their sights on turning building plans and drawings into RD documents. Although this type of record may be more complicated, staff anticipate that the benefits derived will repay the effort.

FOI trends analysis; quick and easy access; training; Health Inspection Reports.

Regional Municipality of Ottawa-Carleton

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Contact Person: Leslie Braden, Freedom of Information and Privacy Co-ordinator, Regional Clerk's Department. Telephone 613-560-2058 Extension # 1898. Fax 613-560-1380.

After receiving high numbers of FOI requests, the Regional Municipality of Ottawa-Carleton decided to provide the public with routine access to Health Inspection Reports on restaurants. Council members were also key players in initiating a process to endorse the routine release of the Health Inspection Reports.

Staff provide same-day service when a request is made. The time and effort involved in dealing with a request depends on the number of requests, with each request taking about an hour to process. The information is then provided via an oral summary on the telephone and/or a hard copy mailed or faxed on request. There is no charge for a report and the Region reports that the costs are minimal. The reports are provided to anyone who makes a request.

After reaching a decision that routine Health Inspection Reports would be released, staff then: (1) sought and received approval from the Community Services Committee of Council (then called the Health Committee) which is comprised of nine Regional Councillors; (2) advertised that the reports would be available for quick and easy access; (3) had plaques placed in food establishments — these 12"x9" plaques read:

An Inspection Certificate

These premises are inspected regularly by a Public Health Inspector from the Ottawa-Carleton Health Department. Inspection Reports are provided to the manager of this establishment. The Inspection Reports are made available from the Ottawa-Carleton Health Department, Environmental Health Department Information Line: 742-4253, 8:30-4:30 Monday to Friday;

and (4) established a phone line for direct call-in.

Prior to the introduction of the routine release of the reports, 90 per cent of the requesters were the media. Now, the requesters are members of the public and lawyers. Generally, the Region believes that the main benefit in releasing these reports is that people can obtain information to make dining choices. Moreover, the inspection process seems to be more open and useful.

Internally, all inspectors and staff were made aware, through training sessions, of the routine release of the inspection reports. Externally, the inspection reports were marketed, initially through newspaper articles and, at present, through a separate number in the government pages of the telephone book. The plaques also help make the public aware of the availability of the reports.

The Region's experience with the routine release of these reports has been extremely positive. Requesters seem pleased to be able to receive the information so quickly and easily and staff have been able to keep up with demand. Overall the Region has found that this approach has been beneficial in reducing staff time and costs.

Electronic dissemination of information.

Management Board Secretariat

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900 Bay Street
Toronto, Ontario
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Contact Person: Mary LeFeuvre, Manager, Access and Inquiry Services. Telephone 416-325-3444. Fax 416-325-3407. BBS: 1-800-667-9979 or 416-327-3000.
Website: www.gov.on.ca

Management Board Secretariat (MBS) has traditionally gathered a wide range of information about the Ontario Government. Much of this information has been published in the hard copy *KWIC* (Key Word in Context) *Index of Ontario Government Services* or as *Repertoire* (the French language version of *KWIC*). As well, MBS has been responsible for publishing a hard copy of the *Directory of Ontario Government Records* as required by the provincial *Act*.

KWIC has been distributed throughout Ontario Government offices, to depository libraries and was made available for sale to the public through Publications Ontario, the government bookstore. The *Directory of Records* has also been distributed to government offices and sold in the bookstore, but was also given out to every public library in the province. However, as far as MBS could measure, these hard copies were used to a much greater degree by government personnel than by the general public.

Over the past few years, MBS has actively disseminated much more information to the public. This trend has been visible in many of the Ontario Government's policies and projects. A couple of years ago, MBS decided to piggyback both the *Directory* and the *KWIC* publications onto a plan to create a database of government information of interest to business. As a result, the Ontario Government, for the first time, had a centralized collection of information on its services and records in electronic format. In 1995 MBS took it another step further and started collecting information on government programs.

MBS is now on the way to developing an information resource that will be useful for both ministries and the public. The new electronic format now makes it possible to increase public access; this is being done by listing information in both English and French on the Internet and additionally on the Ontario Government electronic Bulletin Board System; furthermore, with the Ontario Government's new World Wide Website up and running since September 1995, progress is being made to further the goal of increasing the public's access to government information. Already, 18,000 users per month are accessing the Ontario Government's site.

Accessibility has also increased because: (1) both public libraries and schools have access to either the government Bulletin Board System or to the Internet so the potential to reach the public is as great or greater than it was for hard copy; and (2) the search capability possible with the electronic format of the information makes it much more useful than the hard copy.

Now, for example, the public can search for government mailing addresses, general inquiry numbers and other special numbers, contact names, organizational descriptions, reporting structures and public programs along with eligibility requirements, or any kind of government record or manual. They can search in ways not possible before (such as by geographic location) and searches can occur for program information (such as OSAP - the Ontario Student Awards Program) without having to know the sponsoring ministry. By having this new capability to search for program information themselves, the public also has the opportunity to find out about programs they may qualify for but would ordinarily not have known about, as they may not be a primary target group member.

MBS believes governments will also gain from using this new medium. For example, it is much less expensive to mount the information on the Internet than it is to publish and distribute hard copy versions — the hope is that over time, money will be saved by the gradual reduction of the number of hard copies that are produced. From a customer service perspective, MBS expects that the Internet service will reduce the public's frustration level. The ability to search independently for programs, services and telephone numbers will reduce the number of transferred or fruitless calls made to government offices.

The move to the Internet has been a very necessary step towards providing greater public access. However, as accessibility grows so do the expectations of the public. More than ever, information must be timely, accurate and complete. In the past, MBS has relied on the ministries to collect and verify information each year for the annual publications. Considering the cost of publication, a degree of information currentness on an annual basis was acceptable. It is unlikely, though, that Internet users will tolerate the previous standard. This issue presents a big challenge for both MBS and the ministries. At present MBS is working on ways to make timely updates to information.

Experience with the Internet has also made MBS aware of a greater need for other kinds of standards. After seeing how other governments and businesses present themselves to the world, MBS realized that new standards would have to be set for the Ontario Government web page designs. These standards have now been agreed to and MBS believes that this level of professionalism sets a new model for quality of information and also encourages the mounting of other government information on the website.

Finally, the Internet gives MBS an opportunity to receive feedback from clients. With their help, MBS will be able to create a database of information that reflects clients' interests and needs. MBS sees this as the best kind of public access.

Environmental Bill of Rights — Environmental Registry; mandated legislated disclosure; routine and active electronic dissemination of information that affects the environment; citizen participation.

Ministry of Environment and Energy

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Contact Person: Environmental Bill of Rights Office, General Enquiry: Telephone 416-314-0197.

The *Environmental Bill of Rights Act* (the *EBR Act*) came into effect on February 15, 1994. This law guarantees basic environmental rights for the people of Ontario and opens the decision-making process to greater public scrutiny — the *EBR Act* provides for a minimum level of public participation on government decisions that may affect the environment.

Under section 5 of the *EBR Act*, provision is also made for an Environmental Registry (the Registry):

5.-(1) An environmental registry shall be established as prescribed.

Section 6 of the *EBR Act* sets out the purpose of the Registry:

6.-(1) The purpose of the registry is to provide a means of giving information about the environment to the public.

(2) For the purposes of subsection (1), information about the environment includes, but is not limited to, information about,

- (a) proposals, decisions and events that could affect the environment;
- (b) actions brought under Part VI; and
- (c) things done under this Act.

The Registry is electronic; it is a computerized bulletin board system (BBS) that gives Ontario residents an unprecedented opportunity for access to information, and provides an opportunity to participate in environmentally significant decisions that are being made by specific ministries. The BBS is part of the Government of Ontario Information Service.

The Registry is the main mechanism by which information is disseminated to the public. It contains the following information in both English and French:

- general information on the Environmental Bill of Rights and its regulations;
- Environmental Bill of Rights phase-in schedules for government ministries;
- definitions and help screen;
- Statements of Environmental Values for prescribed ministries;
- notice of proposals and decisions on environmentally significant *Acts*, policies, regulations and prescribed instruments;
- appeals and decisions on instruments; and
- relevant court actions, lawsuits and decisions.

The electronic access feature of the Registry is an example of forward thinking that has resulted in using technology to significantly enhance access and improve citizen participation, and reduce the number of FOI requests. The routine and active electronic dissemination of the information also drastically reduces the amount of paper used and produces an efficient and up-to-date flow of information between government and the public.

The Registry can be accessed through a computer equipped with a modem. This computer equipment is available for use at approximately 330 public and First Nations' libraries across Ontario. Access is also available in remote locations through one of 42 community locations designated by the Ministry as Contact North Access Points.

The Environmental Bill of Rights Office has produced two booklets on the Environmental Bill of Rights and on the Registry; these are the *Ontario Environmental Bill of Rights — User's Guide* and *Ontario's Environmental Bill of Rights — Guide to Access and Use of the Environmental Registry (April 1995)*. Both of these booklets are available through:

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