

The Regional Municipality of York

Committee of the Whole
Finance and Administration
June 10, 2021

Report of the Regional Solicitor

Court Services Annual Report 2020

1. Recommendations

1. Council adopt the Resolution in Attachment 2 advocating for immediate regulatory and legislative amendments to provide municipal Provincial Offences Courts with the flexibility to respond to the critical pressures described in this report.
2. The Regional Clerk circulate the Resolution in Attachment 2 to other municipalities that administer Provincial Offences Courts, the Ministry of the Attorney General, Ministry of Transportation and Association of Municipalities of Ontario for support.
3. The Regional Clerk circulate this report to the Clerks of the local municipalities.

2. Summary

This report provides Council with an overview of the Legal and Court Services, Court Services Branch (“Court Services”) 2020 Annual Report (Attachment 1) submitted to the Ministry of the Attorney General. The report includes a summary of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Court Services, recovery efforts, and planned initiatives for 2021. The Annual Report is required under the 1999 Memorandum of Understanding with the Province of Ontario. This report also recommends advocacy for immediate regulatory and legislative changes enabling flexibility for municipal Provincial Offences Courts to respond locally to their respective critical pressures as court operations resume.

Key Points:

- In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, emergency orders adjourned most 2020 court matters and extended *Provincial Offences Act* (“POA”) legislated timelines, impacting Court Services operations from March, 2020 to the end of February, 2021
- These extensions and adjournments significantly increased the Ontario Court of Justice pending caseload in York Region, led to a substantial administrative backlog and had an adverse impact on fine revenues collected by Court Services

- Court Services resumption efforts included implementation of remote (audio) hearings and the reopening of front counters with appropriate health and safety measures in place
- In addition to leading the resumption and modernization of POA court services, Court Services continued to focus resources on priority projects that improved access to justice and benefitted both York Region and stakeholders
- Council's support is requested in advocating for POA Court reforms which will modernize and streamline the processes governing administration of charges and support municipal recovery efforts while addressing an increasing pending caseload and restoration of revenue streams

3. Background

Court Services administers the *Provincial Offences Act* program in accordance with strict legislative and legal requirements by providing two distinct functions, respectively Court Operations and Prosecutions

In 1999, the Province downloaded responsibility for administration, prosecution, and fine collection of Provincial Offences to municipalities. This transfer resulted in the Ministry of the Attorney General taking on an oversight function and assuming responsibility for the integrity of municipal courts programs. This includes providing ministerial direction on procedural guidelines, prosecutorial, court administration and court support processes and changes to case management procedures. The Ontario Court of Justice maintained its responsibility for the adjudicative function of the courts, while also identifying available judicial resources and providing scheduling for each municipal court.

At the same time, York Region and Court Services took over responsibility for Court Operations and Prosecutions. Court Operations is primarily responsible for court support services, administration of all *Provincial Offences Act* charges issued in York Region, and enforcing and collecting *Provincial Offences Act* fines, costs, surcharges and fees. Prosecutions provides a wide range of services, including the prosecution of cases before the Ontario Court of Justice, appeals, and judicial reviews in the Ontario Superior Court, the Court of Appeal for Ontario, and the Supreme Court of Canada.

York Region's Provincial Offences Court—which is the second largest POA court program in Ontario based on the number of charges filed—is a crucial part of the justice system providing administrative services to over 30 law enforcement and regulatory agencies. These include municipal bylaw enforcement, York Regional Police (YRP), Ontario Provincial Police (OPP), and other Provincial and Federal enforcement agencies operating in York Region. In accordance with the Inter-Municipal Agreement, all municipal parking, bylaw, building and fire code matters are administered and prosecuted by York Region at the

Region's expense with all revenue collected from municipal matters disbursed to the appropriate municipality.

Bill 177 aims to modernize and streamline the Provincial Offences Courts

Legislative amendments to the *Provincial Offences Act* were passed by the Ontario Legislature in December 2017 under Schedule 35 of Bill 177, the *Stronger, Fairer Ontario Act (Budget Measures), 2017*. These amendments include reforming the Early Resolution process, transferring Part III prosecutions to municipalities, improving collection of default fines, and expanding the powers of the Clerk of the Court. Ultimately, the proposed Early Resolution reforms fall considerably short of supporting the justice system modernization and efficiency objectives of the Ministry of the Attorney General.

In December 2019, the Ministry of the Attorney General indicated its intention to implement a phased-in approach to the Bill 177. To date, the Attorney General has only proclaimed and implemented section 48.1, which allows for the use of certified evidence for all Part I proceedings where a set fine exists (commonly referred to as "tickets"). The balance of the Bill 177 amendments is expected to be proclaimed later in 2021.

4. Analysis

COURT SERVICES ANNUAL REPORT 2020

Throughout 2020, three separate orders were issued by the Ontario Court of Justice and the Province adjourning all court matters, suspending all *Provincial Offences Act* timelines, and later extending these timelines into 2021

The Chief Justice of the Ontario Court of Justice (the "Chief Justice") and the Province of Ontario issued separate emergency orders in response to the pandemic throughout 2020 directly impacting Court Services operations. These orders had the combined effect of extending the *Provincial Offences Act* legislative timelines in the period March 16, 2020 through to and including February 26, 2021. Prior to COVID-19, defendants that did not dispute a ticket within the legislated timeline were deemed not to dispute the charge and would be convicted. Without the timelines in effect, defendants no longer were required to pay a ticket or request a trial throughout the duration of the emergency order, ultimately hindering Court Services ability to process matters and adding to the caseload of unprocessed tickets.

Simultaneously, the Chief Justice also issued orders that adjourned all court matters from March 16, 2020 until January 25, 2021. This resulted in the postponement of nearly 100,000 trial matters until 2021, at the earliest. As part of court recovery, the Chief Justice advised Provincial Offence Courts that non-trial matters could go ahead by audio hearings starting September 28, 2020 and that the resumption of remote trials could go forward as early as January 25, 2021, subject to local judicial approval and court readiness. In-person trials

would continue to be adjourned until the court schedule is approved by the Regional Senior Justice of the Peace and health and safety measures have been implemented.

Regrettably, Provincial Offences Court recovery was impeded by lack of timely Provincial direction concerning the resumption of services. While the Provincial objective may have been to support POA operations, the priority was on resumption of Criminal Court operations, resulting in changing timelines and direction. When this was coupled with the existing issue of limited judicial resources—which was intensified throughout the pandemic—Court Services was prevented from effectively responding to the growing POA Court backlog, which directly impacted public access to justice.

Closure of courts due to the pandemic resulted in a 50 per cent decrease in fine revenue and an increased pending caseload of over 100,000 court matters

Extension of *Provincial Offences Act* timelines, along with the continued closure of trial court hearings significantly impacted the ability to process charges and to address pending caseload despite reopening Court Services' front counters on September 14, 2020 for essential administrative services. For example:

- A total of 103,434 charges were filed by enforcement officers—including 400 COVID-19 enforcement related charges—representing a 30 percent decrease from 2019.
- 23,401 charges (or 23 per cent of all charges filed) were marked as “Fail to Respond”. This means the defendant did not select one of the three options on the ticket: pay the fine; plead guilty before a Justice of the Peace; or file a trial request. Since timelines to respond to a ticket were extended throughout 2020, the ability to process Fail to Respond matters was pushed to 2021 has resulted in a significant pending caseload that requires judicial resources—which are not forthcoming—in order to move forward.
- Approximately 100,000 trial matters were impacted in 2020, including 49,000 trial requests. This has put additional pressure on courts that were already operating over maximum capacity prior to the pandemic.

Additionally, court revenue was impacted by operational instabilities such as the Chief Justice's order extending time to pay a fine to February 26, 2021. Total courts revenue for 2020 was \$11,956,394, about 50 per cent lower than 2019 revenue. As of December 2020, approximately 85,666 cases were in default totalling \$53 million. Defaults are considered deferred revenue as all outstanding fines are a debt to the Crown, owed in perpetuity and never forgiven.

Court Services 2020 accomplishments focused on resumption of in-person services, modernizing operations and improving access to justice

In 2020, Court Services' main focus was responding to the COVID-19 pandemic and embracing opportunities to modernize York Region's courts through digital transformation of

services. Health and safety considerations, technology advancements and targeted campaigns were all key components to COVID-19 response initiatives. Even with the disruption to regular operations, Court Services continued to focus resources on priority projects that benefitted both York Region and stakeholders:

- Developed a comprehensive COVID-19 recovery framework including: a phased resumption plan for Court Services; a comprehensive communication plan to internal and external stakeholders; a Safe Space plan for in-person services ensuring the health and safety of staff and customers; and a training plan for staff on health and safety measures, mental wellbeing, and customer service during COVID-19.
- Reopened court and prosecution in-person front counter services. This included leading the coordination of front entrance protocols at the Newmarket and Richmond Hill courts and implementing modified customer journey processes under new health and safety measures that support active COVID-19 screening, occupancy standards, and compliance with face covering requirements. The new processes were further supported through installing self-serve kiosks and purchasing an online appointment solution for courts.
- In collaboration with Property Services, Court Services retrofitted all POA courtrooms and court public space in both Newmarket and Richmond Hill to comply with Regional and Ministry of the Attorney General health and safety requirements.
- In response to Bill 197 the *COVID-19 Economic Recovery Act, 2020*, Court Services assembled a Digital Transformation Team tasked with expanding court services to online or remote access. Some of the initiatives implemented throughout 2020 included acquiring and implementing a remote hearing solution for non-trial court proceedings to help reduce the pending caseload by providing a safe remote environment.
- Court Services' Reminder Notice letter campaign to defaulted offenders reminded them of their outstanding fine and encouraged them to address it. Of 6,212 letters sent, 702 resulted in payments totaling approximately \$200,000. This initiative was a proactive approach to addressing the default fine backlog, while reviving reduced revenue streams due to a pause in collections enforcement. A second round of this initiative was implemented in Q1 of 2021.
- In anticipation of York Region POA Courts resuming remotely in 2020, Prosecutions proactively reviewed approximately 57,000 matters awaiting trial. Where phone numbers or email addresses were available, prosecutors contacted defendants to resolve these matters so that defendants could plead guilty once Court resumed remotely. Through these efforts, approximately 3,000 matters were heard remotely in November and December 2020, which helped to reduce the pending caseload of charges to reschedule and improved revenue.

2020 Key Accomplishments

- Transitioned the Newmarket Provincial Offences court location to 17150 Yonge Street in a timely and efficient manner while adapting to the remote work environment, transitioning to online services, and responding to the Emergency Orders
- In collaboration with York Region Transportation Services, Court Services processed charges and provided support in tracking Key Performance Indicators for the Automated Speed Enforcement Pilot intended to improve road safety, change driver behaviour, and promote safer communities.
- Court Services, along with York Regional Police, implemented a new Digital Evidence Management System (DEMS), which modernizes outdated processes for disclosure of evidence in media format (in-car camera and dashcam videos, photographs and 911 calls). The previous system required disclosure of media evidence to be provided in a physical disc format, whereas DEMS securely shares digital evidence/disclosure with prosecutors, courts and defendants, when requested. This transition has eliminated the backlog of approximately 6,000 disclosure requests that were outstanding as of April 1, 2020.
- Reviewed over 80,000 default case files to facilitate future collection activity to maximize recovery of revenue.
- Participated in the Bill 177 Working Group with Ministry staff and other Municipal Court Managers. As part of this working group, Regional staff provided recommendations to move parts of Bill 177 forward in support of POA courts recovery. Section 48.1(1) allowing for the use of certified evidence involving tickets was proclaimed into effect on December 14, 2020 and Prosecutions implemented process changes in response.

York Region 2021 key priorities will build on technology advancements to improve operational efficiencies and promote greater customer service

In 2021, Court Services will continue to advocate for legislative and regulatory change to advance our objective to provide access to justice that is customer centred, timely, efficient, and fiscally responsible. Court Services will also explore opportunities to increase revenue collection and realize savings through the adoption of technological solutions.

2021 Priorities:

- Continue to expand the remote hearing solution for court proceedings and related processes to reduce backlog and support health and safety precautions
- Leverage the Provincial Audit and Accountability Fund to support York Region's Courts Modernization Project which includes developing a Court Services Digital

Roadmap and a Regional Administrative Monetary Penalties System business model, which will drive efficiencies and improve service delivery

- Implement an online appointment management system for in-person and remote services, supporting York Region's customer-centric approach by providing efficient and timely access to justice
- Working alongside Property Services and other Corporate partners, execute the redesigned workspace project at the Richmond Hill court location to improve customer flow and available office space
- Provide training and wellness opportunities to help staff manage their health and well-being and focus on their continued development.

COUNCIL RESOLUTION

Operational pressures that existed prior to the pandemic have become more pronounced and need to be met with legislative reforms to enable timely recovery of Provincial Offences Courts

Court Services has long advocated for legislative reforms streamlining and modernizing POA Courts to support equitable and timely access to justice. Immediate regulatory and legislative changes are critical to delivering services to the public by putting in place the most modern, efficient, and effective justice system attainable. The resolution in Attachment 2 requests:

1. That the Attorney General halt proclamation of the Early Resolution reforms included in Bill 177 and take immediate action to streamline and modernize this section of the legislation. Under the proposed amendment, complex and redundant time periods and rules will be introduced which will delay court outcomes and cause multiple defendant appearances.
2. That the Attorney General Enact changes to the *Provincial Offences Act* and any related regulations to permit the prosecution and defence to agree, at any stage of a proceeding, to a resolution in writing. This will conserve court time and judicial resources for contested matters.
3. That the Minister of Transportation, in consultation with municipalities, consider temporarily suspending the imposition of demerit points for persons who pay their ticket in cases where they have no previous relevant convictions.

Proclamation of currently planned Bill 177 reforms to the Early Resolution process will prevent reasonable and effective access to court proceedings by creating a complex and lengthy process

Early Resolution is an optional program Provincial Offences Courts can offer allowing defendants who opt to dispute their charges to request a meeting with a prosecutor to resolve the charges prior to a trial. Operational limitations resulted in York Region Court Services suspending this option in 2017. Prior to 2016, matters set for early resolution were

heard within the intake court, however, due to a province-wide shortage of Justices of the Peace, the Regional Senior Justice of the Peace directed these matters to be scheduled within the courtroom. York Region Court Services did not have the capacity to accommodate the roughly 30,000 early resolution matters into the court schedule therefore suspending this option on January 1, 2017.

Under the proposed Bill 177 amendment, when a defendant attends a meeting with the prosecutor, a successful resolution culminating in a recorded judicial outcome is inordinately delayed by a series of complicated rules and redundant time periods which will not be easily understood by the public and will accordingly hinder and not facilitate access to justice.

In order to achieve the stated goal, the Bill 177 provisions must be amended to facilitate prosecution/defendant resolution discussions and to allow the resolution to be implemented without the need for judicial involvement and redundant waiting periods. If the Ministry of the Attorney General were to make it more effective and efficient to administer Early Resolution proceedings, York Region Court Services would reconsider offering the Early Resolution option to defendants.

Legislative reforms would provide timely access to justice to millions of Ontarians accessing the system annually

Provincial Offence Courts play an integral role in Ontario's Justice system with an average of 1.5 million matters heard in Provincial Offences Courts across the Province annually. POA Courts are the most frequently accessed courts by Ontarians while at the same time being the most overlooked and under resourced by the Province. Chronic under-allocation of judicial resources has resulted in increased scheduled and unscheduled court closures. Municipalities have no control over the availability of Judicial resources and are at the mercy of the province to allocate adequate resources.

These issues are not unique to York Region. The Municipal Court Managers Association of Ontario has elevated these issues and made requests to Provincial staff with limited response. There are many benefits to be realized Province-wide through streamlining and modernizing of the Provincial Offences Program. Reforms will reduce dependency on scarce judicial resources while enabling timely access to justice. Importantly, it will also allow municipalities to implement the technology to support an efficient process and expedite dispositions for defendants.

Temporarily suspending imposition of demerit points would result in fewer trial requests

It is understood that defendants often request trials to seek resolutions that reduce demerit points. If demerit points were temporarily suspended for defendants with no previous relevant convictions who acknowledge guilt and pay their ticket, this could potentially reduce trial requests and accordingly alleviate pressures faced by trial courts. Pertinent details—such as the duration of the temporary initiative and which offences it would apply to, how to deal with multiple tickets, as well as eligibility criteria—could be determined by the Ministry of Transportation in consultation with municipalities.

5. Financial

There are no financial implications directly associated with this report. The performance measures set out in this report are reflected in the 2021 operating budget.

6. Local Impact

There is no local municipal impact directly associated with this report. The Region's Provincial Offences Courts provide court administration and prosecution related to municipal bylaw and parking matters for all nine local municipalities.

7. Conclusion

This annual report provides an overview of the activities and Provincial Offences Court services provided by York Region Court Services in 2020, and identifies key legislative amendment opportunities that York Region should continue to advocate for.

For more information on this report, please contact Lisa Brooks, Director Court Operations at 1-877-464-9675 ext. 73209. Accessible formats or communication supports are available upon request.



Recommended by:

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Approved for Submission:

Bruce Macgregor
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Attachments (2)
eDocs #12583939