Municipal councils in the Lakeland spend an average of 35 per cent of meetings closed to public

MEREDITH KERR
Lakeland This Week

LAKELAND - A municipal council in the Lakeland spends an average of 35 per cent of any given meeting in closed session.

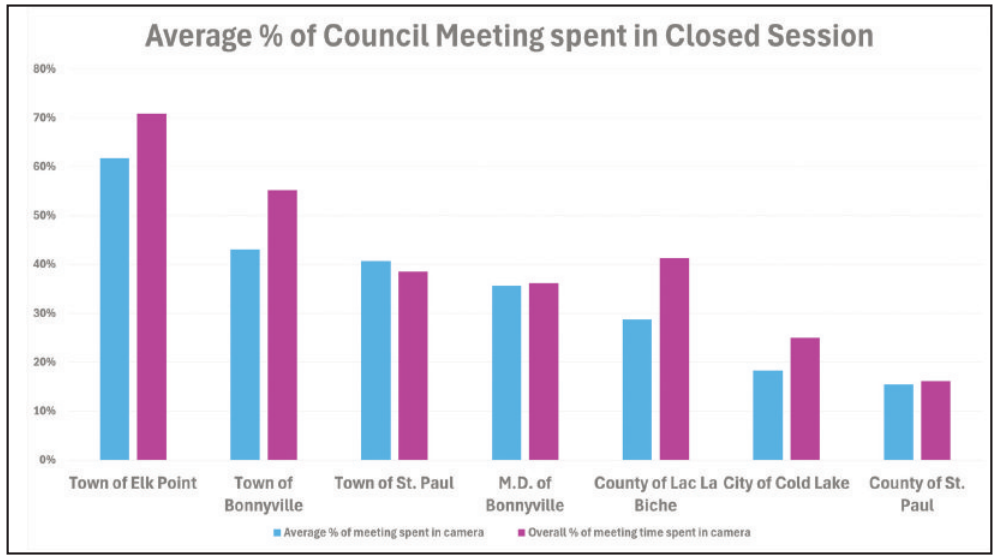
Lakeland This Week conducted an audit of the seven municipal councils regularly reported on by our reporters to determine how transparently the local governments are operating.

The audit reviewed all available meeting minutes dated April 1 – June 30, 2025, and tracked the duration of meetings, time spent in closed session, number of motions, number of motions arising from closed session, number of closed session items 'received as information,' and the number of motions specifically including the phrase 'as discussed in closed session' or 'as presented' where the impact was that the reader would be unable to understand even the gist of what council directed.

Data for the audit was compiled manually, without the use of artificial intelligence.

According to Michael Francouer, a spokesperson for Alberta Municipal Affairs, "Under the Municipal Government Act, municipalities are required to conduct council and council committee meetings in public. Municipalities may close all or part of a council or council committee meeting to the public, if the matter to be discussed is within one of the exceptions to disclosure."

Those exceptions are when public disclosure could be harmful to: third party business interests; third party personal privacy; individual or public safety; law enforcement; intergovernmental relations; or economic or other interests.



A guidance document published by Municipal Affairs in 2017 explicitly says budget deliberations, including tax assessments, mill rates, penalties, capital expenditures, budget requirements for staff, and the setting of salary ranges should not be discussed in closed session.

It also states any contentious issue is not to be discussed behind closed doors.

"No resolution may be passed within a session closed to the public, except for a resolution to return to an open session of council. All other resolutions must be passed in open session to be valid," said Francouer.

According to the data collected for the audit, Lac La Biche County had the most motions arising from closed session. They also led the Lakeland for most motions including the phrase "as discussed in closed session" with more than double the occurrences of Elk Point or Cold Lake.

"As discussed in closed session" was noticeably absent from all motions arising from closed session in the Town of Bonnyville, M.D. of Bonnyville, Town of St. Paul and County of St. Paul.

"Municipal Affairs does not offer guidance towards the wording of resolutions, whether made in the course of the normal business of council or resulting from discussions held in closed session. In general, it is recommended that resolutions provide clear and unambiguous direction to the administration to carry out council's direction," said Francouer.

See "Closed session" page 8

CABRINI PARK CHALLENGE CUP
Bean Bag Championship
Mallaig Antique Tractor & Car Show
August 23, 2025
Mallaig, Alberta
Breakfast at Mallaig & Dist. Museum
8:30 a.m. to 11:00 a.m.
Car & Tractor Registrations
10:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m.
Prizes for People's choice and different categories
Tractor Parade @ 1:00 p.m.
Bean Bag Tournament
10:00 a.m. at ball diamonds, Cabrini Park
Parking Lot Pickleball 11:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.
*Beer Gardens *Food and Refreshments *Tons of FUN
CONTACTS
Car Show
Henri Amyotte
780-635-3817/780-210-0581
Laurier Dechaine
780-210-3056
Tractor Show
Raymond Amyotte
780-635-3804
Neil Lilje
780-614-5819
Bean Bag Tournament
Laurier Jodoin
780-201-7124
Ryan Berg
780-210-7309
Parking Lot Pickleball
Denis Lamoureux
780-645-1502
Proceeds to
Mallaig Museum, Mallaig Arena Project and Mallaig Minor Hockey
Sponsors
Mallaig & Dist. Museum, Mallaig Chamber of Commerce, Mallaig & Dist. Ag Society, Mallaig Minor Hockey

Upcoming Live Estate Auction
For the Late William Bazian Of Warspite, AB
On Sat. Aug. 30, 2025 At 10:00am
Partial list of items include: JD 4840 tractor w/ loader, 2007 Genie Z-60/34, 1980 Peterbuilt truck with metal silage box, JD 3460 tractor w/ attachments, tools, parts, and much more.
This is a **live auction**, bidders must be present to purchase items.
For more details and pictures of above items, please visit www.globalauctionguide.com
SALE CONDUCTED BY:
BOYLE & DISTRICT AUCTION MART LTD.
Boyle, Alberta - Lic. # 167567
Auctioneer
Wayne Kowalchuk 780-689-4023

PRO TOURS
LAUGHLIN NEVADA
AND THE GRAND CANYON
November 14 - 23, 2025
Includes 5 nights on the banks of the Colorado River and Day Trip to the South Rim of the Grand Canyon
$1920.00/person
For full details of the full inclusions and day details Call or Email
Phone: 780-460-4408
Email: hello@protours.ca
Website: protours.ca



Murder on the Battle River Express
Saturday – November 29th • Depart 2:30 pm • Return 8:00 pm
Sunday – November 30th • Depart Kelsey 12:30 pm • Return 6:00 pm
Tickets $150 Adults / **$100** Youth
Battle River Train Excursions
SCAN ME
FULL DETAILS & BOOK TICKETS VISIT: WWW.BATTLERIVERTRAIN.COM OR CALL/TEXT 780-781-9260

Closed session

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Lac La Biche Mayor responds

In an e-mailed statement, Lac La Biche Mayor Paul Reutov defended the County's use of closed session for some discussions.

"Lac La Biche County is a diverse and specialized municipality that continues to look for growing opportunities. Many times, when having to discuss items in closed session, this is due to Third Party Business Interests or Economic Development Opportunities, to name a few," said Reutov.

"The County ensures that we remain professional in all matters that are required to be held in closed session in accordance with the [Access to Information Act], however, we understand the responsibility the municipality has to ensure transparency in other aspects," said Reutov.

"Although certain discussions must be kept within a closed session, the County acknowledges that we could amend ways in which we proceed with our motions arising from closed session in some circumstances. Administration will review opportunities to improve," said Reutov.

He said they will continue to share information as appropriate "and trust that the public understands where information must remain confidential until it can be shared publicly."

"The County continues to build on our community strengths, enhancing residents' quality of life, and deepening our relationships with our partners," said Reutov.

Cold Lake Mayor says councils need to be careful

The City of Cold Lake had the second lowest average percentage of their meetings spent in closed session, averaging 18 per cent over 12 meetings. They were also the only municipality to have a separate motion entering and exiting closed session for each item discussed, allowing the reader of the minutes to understand exactly how much time was spent on an agenda item.

"We're just following the MGA and our interpretation of it," said Cold Lake Mayor Craig Copeland in a phone interview with *Lakeland This Week*.

"We try our best to avoid in camera. That's kind of been our philosophy over the years, is to have everything open," said Copeland.

He said a big part of the role of elected officials is to set the budget and priorities, and trust administration to carry out those directions.

"Councils have to be careful that they don't get into the meddling of the municipal government. That's not your role," said Copeland.

"If there's councils going into camera a lot, then that's usually a sign that something - it's just messy. And they need to sort of step back and, and maybe they need to get a guy like Gord Macintosh to come in and help them out," said Copeland.

Gord Macintosh is a consultant hired by the City of Cold Lake at the beginning of each council term to help the incoming council understand their roles and determine their vision and priorities going forward.

Copeland said one of the strengths he sees in the City of Cold Lake is the depth of the orientation and training they have for elected officials at the start of each council term.

"We call it Cold Lake 101, where you get taught about the city itself and also the policies. And we do an intense orientation for a month. I'm not running again, but on the packages when you decide to run for council, you'll see the heavy commitment that you have to commit to in the beginning of your term, and it's intense," said Copeland.

There are approximately 30 hours of mandatory training in the first week of November, followed by a three-day convention in Calgary, 28 hours of service level reviews and strategic planning in the third week, and 15 hours for budget deliberations and the first regular council meeting in the last week of November.

M.D. of Bonnyville on par

The M.D. of Bonnyville averaged 36 per cent of each meeting in closed session, putting them precisely in the middle of the pack. The three motions arising from closed session were all sufficiently detailed, and the singular item accepted as information specified the property in question.

Reeve Barry Kalinski said the results of the audit reflects "council's dedication to our 2022-2027 Strategic Plan. From our vision statement and guiding principles, transparency and openness was one of the consistent themes."

"By following provincial legislation that guides and provides rules for in-camera sessions, we are demonstrating our belief and commitment to openness and transparency in decision making," said Kalinski.

Town of St. Paul CAO highlights unique circumstances

Town of St. Paul CAO Steven Jeffery said the data provided in the audit was useful and interesting, and that council and administration both value the importance of transparency and protecting personal information and business interests when information is provided in closed session.

"I imagine that this information is fairly fluid with all municipalities within the sample area given the information they are dealing with at the time. For example, our averages are brought up significantly in that sample timeframe because of one particular meeting on May 15 where Town council's sole purpose for the meeting was to conduct the CAO evaluation (me) and the entire meeting was held in closed [session] except for any motions that came out of it," said Jeffery.

Indeed, while the Town of St. Paul has an average of 41 per cent of each meeting spent in camera, if the May 15 CAO evaluation is excluded, that number drops to 30 per cent.

County of St. Paul motions

The County of St. Paul spent the least amount of time in closed session of any of the municipalities evaluated for the audit. They averaged 16 per cent of each meeting in camera and 18 per cent overall.

"Two of the County's values are accountability and integrity - both of which, at the end of the day, come down to transparency. We owe it to our ratepayers to be as open and transparent as possible, as the areas we work with have a direct impact on them," said Jason Wallsmith, County of St. Paul CAO.

The three motions arising from closed session discussions were remarkably clear in the minutes. They reflected the locations under discussion, the estimated cost of the selected option, and the subject to be addressed in a letter to the Minister of Transportation.

"Any time council makes a decision, we want to make sure we are doing the right things for the right reasons. That can only be done through open communication. We use closed session when needed, but ultimately any topics that can be discussed openly should be so that ratepayers can follow along with the conversation," said Reeve Glen Ockerman.

Town of Elk Point and Town of Bonnyville

The Town of Elk Point spent an average of 62 per cent of any given meeting closed to the public and an overall average of 70 per cent.

Elk Point replaced their chief administrative officer during the time period included by the audit. If the nine hours spent interviewing candidates for the position on May 24 are excluded, their averages drop to 57 per cent of any given meeting and 54 per cent overall.

While Elk Point did have several motions including the phrase "as discussed," on the whole the motions were specific regarding what land was offered for sale or purchase and from who.

The Town of Bonnyville spent an average of 43 per cent of each meeting and an overall average of 55 per cent of their time in closed session.

Their motions arising from closed session were generally clear and specific about the subject, location, and financial impacts.

Lakeland This Week did reach out to the Town of Elk Point and Town of Bonnyville by e-mail with the results of the audit but did not receive a response before deadline.

