

# MUNICIPAL RATEPAYERS GUIDE



**A TOOL FOR CREATING AND MAINTAINING  
A LOCAL RATEPAYER GROUP**



# MUNICIPAL RATEPAYERS GUIDE

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### About the Canadian Taxpayers Federation

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The Canadian Taxpayers Federation (CTF) is a federally incorporated, non-profit and non-partisan, advocacy organization dedicated to lower taxes, less waste and accountable government. The CTF was founded in Saskatchewan in 1990 when the *Association of Saskatchewan Taxpayers* and the *Resolution One Association of Alberta* joined forces to create a national taxpayers organization. Today, the CTF has over 70,000 supporters from coast-to-coast.

The CTF maintains a federal office in Ottawa as well as provincial and regional offices in British Columbia, Alberta, the Prairies, Ontario and Atlantic Canada. Provincial and regional offices conduct research and advocacy activities specific to their provinces and regions in addition to acting as regional organizers of nation-wide initiatives.

CTF offices field hundreds of media interviews each month, hold press conferences and issue regular news releases, commentaries and publications to advocate for the common interest of taxpayers. The CTF's flagship publication, *The Taxpayer* magazine, is published four times a year. Issues and *Action Updates* are regularly sent to CTF supporters. CTF offices also send out weekly *Let's Talk Taxes* commentaries to more than 800 media outlets and personalities nation wide.

CTF representatives speak at functions, make presentations to government, meet with politicians, and organize petition drives, events and campaigns to mobilize citizens to affect public policy change.

All CTF staff and board directors are prohibited from holding a membership in any political party. The CTF is independent of any institutional affiliations. Contributions to the CTF are not tax deductible.

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### Acknowledgements

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### Introduction

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The Canadian Taxpayers Federation (CTF) has received countless e-mails and phone calls from local taxpayers looking for answers and advice as to how to constructively address local government concerns. This guidebook is the CTF's answer.

Canada has roughly 4,000 municipal governments from coast-to-coast-to-coast; and while the CTF keeps tabs on several large cities, one organization cannot be a watchdog for every single one of them. It's up to concerned citizens across the country to accept a leadership role in "watch-dogging" their local government.

Forming a municipal ratepayers association (RPA) within a community is the first step towards productively channeling concern about high taxes, wasteful government spending and a lack of accountability into positive outcomes. Getting organized can be both fun and rewarding, but success will require determination, patience and as this guidebook's existence implies, some advice.

Whether a municipality has a population of 2,000 or 200,000, this guidebook will assist local taxpayers by equipping them with the necessary steps for developing an organization capable of taking on city hall and doing at the local level what the Canadian Taxpayers Federation (CTF) does at the provincial and federal

levels.

This guide is broken into five sections:

- ***Starting a Ratepayers Association*** provides basic information for getting organized. This includes information on your group's purpose, organizational structure, and sample constitution.
- ***Tools for Local Taxpayers*** provides some of the basic tools that ratepayer associations can use to further their objectives.
- The ***Beggar's Checklist*** outlines proposed policy initiatives and questions that an organization could challenge a council with before it makes a decision to raise taxes or go "begging" to a higher level of government.
- ***A Property Tax Cap*** is a CTF proposal to limit property tax increases.
- ***Toward More Efficient Municipal Government in Canada*** is a series of articles that discuss municipal government spending and provides examples of efficiencies.

To keep this guidebook manageable, sections III, IV and V are introductions only. Links to detailed material are provided if you wish more information.



# SECTION I: Starting a Ratepayers Association

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*Starting a Ratepayers Association (RPA) provides basic information for getting a local taxpayers group off the ground. This includes information on your group's purpose, organizational structure, fundraising and sample constitution.*

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## Core Considerations

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### Focus

A RPA's focus should be on local government expenditures, related rates of taxation (ie. property taxes and user fees) and the need for greater transparency, accountability and efficiency in the delivery of local government services. This will help to create widespread support for an RPA's initiatives and public policy recommendations.

A RPA should avoid the temptation of veering into provincial or federal issues and deal specifically with local concerns. Importantly, an RPA should steer clear of any direct involvement in local politics and remain a non-partisan advocacy group willing to work with whoever is elected to council. Aligning with a political party or candidate at any level of government will limit the appeal of an RPA and diminish its credibility with other community leaders, the media and the public at large.

### Scope

A RPA should defend the interests of all local taxpayer categories: residential, business and

industrial. While defending the interests of all local taxpayers, an RPA should only claim to represent those who wish to be represented by it. For example, a 'women's rights' group that claims to represent all women is offensive to those who might not share in its core views. Therefore, an RPA should claim to represent local taxpayers that agree with its core mission statement.

### Participation

A RPA built with the anticipation that a large number of highly involved individuals will volunteer is unlikely to succeed and is in fact unnecessary. In reality, a RPA that involves a small number of highly motivated core members can be highly effective. The key to success is the composition of this core membership.

To be successful in influencing municipal public policy, a RPA will need first and foremost to be seen as being credible. The persuasive force of its ideas, its persistence and its choice of a spokesperson are central to gaining credibility. Further to this, the collective educational accomplishments, occupational experience or



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service to the community of a RPA's members will be important to the organization's reputa-

tion.

### Strategic Considerations

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#### Time

Members of a RPA that expect quick, overnight results are likely to find themselves demoralized and without success. A reasonable period of time – such as a single electoral cycle – should be chosen to seek influence over the public policy agenda. To illustrate the point, RPA members should know that the key to political success lies in a politician first seeing which way a parade is moving before jumping in to lead it. The role of a RPA is to start that parade and ensure that it continues on course once politicians claim ownership.

#### Professionalism

Arguments for change must be well crafted and accurate. Poor research or inept presentation will do more to undermine the influence of an RPA than the efforts of political opponents. Use credible sources such as:

- Statistics Canada: [statcan.gc.ca/start-](http://statcan.gc.ca/start-debut-eng.html)

[debut-eng.html](http://debut-eng.html)

- Tax Facts: [taxpayer.com/resource-centre/taxfacts](http://taxpayer.com/resource-centre/taxfacts)
- Municipal budgetary and accounting documents
- Websites of provincial ministries responsible for community or municipal affairs

#### Volunteer Management

RPA members are volunteers with limited available time. Accordingly:

- Meetings should be infrequent and relatively brief; and
- An agenda should be distributed in advance of each meeting and minutes or an “action plan” produced soon after its conclusion. This will help to encourage accountability for tasks assigned to members.

### Getting Started

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#### Organization

Once a core group is organized, the preliminary tasks at hand will be to:

- Assign officer responsibilities (chair/president, secretary, spokesperson, etc.);
- Assign a single spokesperson to ensure

the RPA “speaks with one voice.” He or she must not only be articulate, media savvy and presentable, but be prepared to work diligently in establishing and maintaining contact with media representatives, elected officials, other community opinion leaders and at times bureaucrats;

- Assign someone responsible for website



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and/or blog along with any social media sites you chose to use. They can be set up simply and at no cost, The challenge rests in keeping them updated. This person may also be responsible for distribution of e-mails to supporters, donors and even local media (the latter in connection with the spokesperson);

- Decide on a name for the organization;
- Adopt a constitution; and
- Raise basic funds necessary for its operation.

### Incorporation

To further stability and reinforce the commit of members, your RPA should be incorporated pursuant to the provisions of your respective provincial society act. RPA members should be aware that such a process is generally simple, inexpensive and carries basic annual reporting requirements. The most important element of

incorporation for a RPA is it's "purposes clause" settings out the association's objectives.

### Financing

A RPA should maintain an account in a financial institution. To effectively raise and managing funds:

- Encourage RPA members to make small contributions every year (ie. \$100) so as to cover ongoing administrative expenses (ie. website hosting and domain name registration, post office box, photocopying, room rentals, etc.);
- Seek donations from members' respective personal connections with family, friends and acquaintances resident in the community; and
- Use e-mail appeals to solicit donations for specific issue campaigns, with follow-up telephone calls and/or mail if necessary.

## How to Fight City Hall

### An Example Ratepayers Association

West Vancouver's *Interested Taxpayers' Action Committee* (ITAC) is an example of a successful RPA. It was established by two individuals in January of 2006. A copy of its constitution, filed in May 2008, is included below for use as a template.

ITAC consists of 14 members - all residents of the municipality - including individuals with backgrounds in accounting, finance and community service, having held elected office on local council and school boards.

ITAC maintains an informational blog and

successfully uses targeted e-mail appeals to raise money. On the basis of a single appeal via e-mail appeal made in March of 2007, ITAC raised over \$6,500 for a series of community newspaper advertisements encouraging West Vancouver residents to demand the district restrain its spending and end/or curtail tax increases.

Arguably, ITAC's efforts since its formation contributed significantly to the District of West Vancouver imposing the lowest property tax increase in 2009 among the 22 municipalities in the Metro Vancouver region, as well as to making local government expenditures and related taxation rates the central issue of the Novem-



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ber 2008 municipal election. Approximately 60% of those who voted in that election cast a ballot for a mayoral candidate who supported a reduction in local government expenditures

and the restraining of tax increases. In February 2010 - again due in large part to ITAC's pressure - the municipality brought in a budget that involved a zero-percent tax increase.

### Sample Constitution

#### FORM 1 SOCIETY ACT Constitution

1. The name of the society is "INTERESTED TAXPAYERS' ACTION COMMITTEE"
2. The purposes of the society are as follows:
  - a) To foster and facilitate by all methods public awareness of the source, quantum, manner, efficiency of use, wisdom of use or other issues associated with the receipt or projected receipt of funds by local government organization and/or associated with the expenditure of local government funds, whether characterized as capital or operating expenditures or otherwise;
  - b) To foster and facilitate by all methods the analysis, debate and discussion of the source, quantum, manner, efficiency of use, wisdom of use or other issues associated with the receipt or projected receipt of funds by local government organization and/or associated with the expenditure of local governmental funds, whether characterized as capital or operating expenditures or otherwise;
  - c) To foster, encourage and facilitate by all methods the involvement of people in local self-government in all manners;
  - d) To solicit, receive and accept funds by gift, bequest or otherwise and apply these funds to the functions of the society; and
  - e) To address and attend to issues and matters arising from the purposes of the society referred to in paragraphs 2(a) through (d) and any other purposes of the society from time to time lawfully adopted by the Society.
3. The Society shall have perpetual succession and has power to acquire by purchase, gift, devise, bequest, trust agreement, contract or otherwise, real and personal property, and may hold, sell, dispose of, exchange, mortgage, lease, let, improve, and develop any such property, and without restricting the generality of the foregoing, may acquire in any way or ways real and personal property as is empowered by the Section.
4. The activities of the Society shall be carried on with out purpose of gain for its members and any income, profits or other accretions to the Society shall be used in promoting the purposes of the Society.
5. Upon the dissolution of the Society and after the payment of all its debts and liabilities, any remaining property shall be turned over, transferred and assigned to one or more recognized charitable organizations operating within the Province of British Columbia as directed by the members.
6. Paragraphs 3, 4, 5 and this Paragraph are unalterable.

#### Bylaws

The bylaws of the society are those set out in Schedule B to the *Society Act*.



# SECTION II:

## Tools for Local Taxpayers

Tools for Local Taxpayers provides some of the basic tools that ratepayer associations can use to further their objectives.

### File a Freedom of Information Request

In order to examine various areas of municipal government spending, your RPA will want to have municipal departments send you records that are not necessarily published automatically. Most government bodies have a legislated duty to send you most documents when you instruct them to do so. These duties are governed through the *Access to Information Act* (ATI) federally and by similar legislation (normally referred to as a *Freedom of Information Act*, or *FOI*) provincially and municipally.

#### Federal ATI Requests

An order for documents through the ATI Act is a tool for citizens to use in accessing federal government records. To do so:

- Download the ATI request form at: [tbs-sct.gc.ca/tbsf-fsct/350-57-eng.rtf](http://tbs-sct.gc.ca/tbsf-fsct/350-57-eng.rtf)
- Determine the government department that is in custody of the records that you wish to examine. It is beneficial to contact the ATI coordinator of each department to ensure that you are filing with the appropriate institution. The following website contains a complete list of federal institutions with their respective ATI coordinators from which to choose: [tbs-sct.gc.ca/atip-aiprp/apps/coords/index-eng.asp](http://tbs-sct.gc.ca/atip-aiprp/apps/coords/index-eng.asp)

- Fill out the text of your request. Be clear and concise when describing the records you wish to access. You may find it useful to discuss the wording of the request with the department's ATI coordinator. While the department has a legal obligation to help you identify the records you wish to examine, be careful of how broad or narrow the scope of your request is. A request that is too broadly worded may leave you with hundreds of pages of irrelevant information, while too narrow a request may leave you with nothing at all.
- Below is an example of an appropriately worded ATI request for federal spending on promotional items in a municipality  
  
Provide documentation of all federal expenditures on promotional items in 2008-09 in the Town of Ingersoll. Items include, but are not restricted to: t-shirts, hand bags, stress balls, key chains, mugs and other give-away items that are used for promotion. Do not include brochures, flyers or printed signage.
- Enclose a \$5 cheque/money order made out to the Receiver General of Canada.



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Mail your request to the ATI coordinator of the department you have chosen and wait for a response. Unfortunately, not all ATI requests are a smooth process. Complications or roadblocks that you might face include:

- The information provided is not what you were looking for;
- The department claims that the information does not exist;
- The department claims that the information is protected from release by exemption;
- The department is late in its response; or
- The department requests an unreasonable time-extension.

Should you face any of these scenarios, you may file a complaint with the Office of the Information Commissioner of Canada (OIC) who will review your case and potentially take up your cause. You can find the OIC at [infocom.gc.ca](http://infocom.gc.ca).

### Provincial and Municipal FOI Requests

A FOI request is the provincial/municipal equivalent of a federal ATI request. The steps to filing this type of request are very similar. The primary differences are usually the layout of the request form, the availability of appeal routes and potentially the cost of requests.

### Provincial FOI Websites

- British Columbia: [gov.bc.ca/citz/jao/foi](http://gov.bc.ca/citz/jao/foi)

- Alberta: [servicealberta.ca/foip](http://servicealberta.ca/foip)
- Saskatchewan: [oipc.sk.ca](http://oipc.sk.ca)
- Manitoba: [gov.mb.ca/chc/fippa](http://gov.mb.ca/chc/fippa)
- Ontario: [ipc.on.ca](http://ipc.on.ca)
- Quebec [cai.gouv.qc.ca](http://cai.gouv.qc.ca)
- New Brunswick: [gnb.ca/content/gnb/en/services/services\\_renderer.200949.html](http://gnb.ca/content/gnb/en/services/services_renderer.200949.html)
- Nova Scotia: [foipop.ns.ca](http://foipop.ns.ca)
- Prince Edward Island: [gov.pe.ca/jps/index.php3?number=1024336&lang=E](http://gov.pe.ca/jps/index.php3?number=1024336&lang=E)
- Newfoundland & Labrador: [justice.gov.nl.ca/just/info/accessrequestform.html](http://justice.gov.nl.ca/just/info/accessrequestform.html)
- You can also submit a FOI request to your local government. The following are examples of municipal FOI request forms:
- Calgary: [calgary.ca/DocGallery/BU/city-clerks/requestform.pdf](http://calgary.ca/DocGallery/BU/city-clerks/requestform.pdf)
- Ottawa: [ottawa.ca/city\\_hall/mfippa/access/form\\_en.pdf](http://ottawa.ca/city_hall/mfippa/access/form_en.pdf)

Wording of a provincial or municipal FOI request should be similar in clarity and scope to federal ATI requests. For example:

Provide documentation of the allotted paid vacation time for all employees of the City of Ottawa for the 2008-2009 fiscal year. In addition, provide the total number of paid vacation days that were used in the 2008-2009 fiscal year, broken down by department.

## Create and Maintain a Media List

An RPA needs a media list to ensure their message is getting to the public. To create a media list:



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### 1. **Identify your target media outlets.**

Because your group will focus on municipal issues, it is advisable to focus on local newspapers and radio stations.

### 2. **Obtain the media outlet's contact information.**

More specifically, identify the person responsible for reporting on your issues. Start out by searching the respective outlet's website and making phone calls to obtain contact information for the local city hall reporter, the editorial page editor and the letters editor. For TV and radio, ask for the assignment desk contact information as well.

### 3. **Organize the list.**

There are several ways to organize your media list. Groups with intermediate computer skills can use *Mail Chimp* or *iContact*. These services allow for easy sending, sub-lists and version control by storing your list online. While not recommended, groups with limited

computer skills can use a program like Microsoft Excel to create a database. Some important headings to include are the name of the outlet, their phone number, their mailing and e-mail addresses and the individual that deals specifically with your issues.

### 4. **Keep a record.**

It's a good idea to keep a record of releases sent and interviews conducted (to whom and by whom) for follow-up and reference. It also helps to keep your list and contact information up to date.

Your RPA may purchase a media list; however, this is often unnecessary for small communities and overly expensive for grassroots organizations. Should your RPA decide to pursue such a route, you may wish to consider the following: CanMedia Planning Inc. [canmedia.com/about.html](http://canmedia.com/about.html) | Cision: [insight.cision.com/content/adwords-database-ca](http://insight.cision.com/content/adwords-database-ca)

## Write a Press Release

A press release is a short statement delivered to the media, giving reporters substantive information about the topic in question. It can be released during a press conference, a rally or directly to the media via e-mail. Press releases generally have a standard format, so you should be able to use your first press release as a template for subsequent releases.

Below are a few basic principles to keep in mind while creating a press release for your RPA.

- Print on your RPA letterhead.
- The headline should appear in large, bolded letters at the top of the page.

- Start with a strong headline and opening paragraph. The text of the release should be clear and concise.
- The body should contain accurate and valuable information addressing the "5 Ws": who, what, when, where and why. The body of the release should begin with the city of origin and the date.
- At the bottom of the release, a contact name and phone number for the organization's spokesperson should be provided. The number thirty in between two hyphens (-30-) indicates the end of the press release.



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- Should your press release contain independent or original work such as calculations, templates, or any other document that needs referencing, you should in-

clude a “backgrounder.” A backgrounder is the information you are talking about in your press release in greater detail.

### Sample News Release



October 18, 2010

#### CTF releases Calgary candidate survey responses

**Overwhelming support for the creation of a truly independent city auditor (87 per cent of respondents) and opposition of using tax dollars to build a replacement for the Saddledome (80 per cent of respondents)**

**CALGARY:** The Canadian Taxpayers Federation (CTF) released today the results of a five-question survey sent to each Calgary candidate running for civic office in the October 18<sup>th</sup> municipal election.

The majority of candidates running for election responded, including all of the main contenders for the mayor’s seat. Ric McIver and Naheed Nenshi both indicated their support for a truly independent city auditor, while Barb Higgins indicated she was undecided and awaiting the recommendations of the current review.

“With uncertainty still surrounding the procurement audit and the office of the city auditor, the opportunity to re-shape and re-establish the auditor position as a truly independent job is one that cannot be ignored,” said CTF-Alberta director Scott Hennig. “It’s great to see strong support from two leading contenders for mayor and openness from the other.”

Of the three main contenders, only Ric McIver indicated his full and immediate support for limiting property tax hikes to no more than the inflation rate. Barb Higgins indicated her support, but mentioned that given the current fiscal situation it would take a few years to achieve. Naheed Nenshi supported limiting the tax hike to the combined inflation and population growth rate.

“We know that wages tend to follow the inflation rate, and when inflation is near zero, tax hikes of four, five or six per cent a year means less money in the pockets of Calgarians at the end of the day,” said Hennig.

All three mayoral contenders indicated their opposition to using civic tax dollars to construct a replacement for the Saddledome.

“If the situation in Edmonton is anything to judge, this debate just around the corner in Calgary,” said Hennig. “Every new NHL arena built in Canada in the past two decades has been virtually 100 per cent privately funded. A new NHL rink in Calgary should be the same.”

Seventy-two per cent of candidates who responded indicated they would be voluntarily releasing details on their campaign contributions before the October 18<sup>th</sup> vote. Many, including mayoral candidates McIver, Higgins, Nenshi, Hawksworth and Burrows, as well as aldermanic candidates Chris Harper (Ward 1), Gord Lowe (Ward 2), Kevin Taylor (Ward 7) and Diane Colley-Urquhart (Ward 13) have already disclosed some contributions on their website.

“What a difference from three years ago,” said Hennig. “We asked this question last election and only a handful of candidates were willing to be open and transparent with their financial backers. It’s great to see a significant increase in transparency this election.”

A chart of candidate responses can be found [here](#). A selection of candidates’ full responses will be posted on our [blog](#). Downloadable Version: [Complete Results - Calgary.pdf](#)

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**For further information please contact:**

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### Keep any News Clippings

The obvious reason to keep clippings is they provide a record, but media coverage also demonstrates credibility, motivates volunteers and

shows potential donors that your efforts are gaining traction. This is especially true if your RPA achieves a policy victory.

### Sample Media

#### Calgary civic candidates more transparent than Edmonton counterparts [Click here](#) to read full article.

BY KELLY CRYDERMAN, CALGARY HERALD    OCTOBER 12, 2010

Calgary - There's hope the next city council will be more fiscally restrained and govern in a more transparent fashion, according the Canadian Taxpayers Federation.

### Write a Letter to the Editor

A letter to the editor can be used to express an opinion that is supportive of your organization's cause. Below are a few basic principles to keep in mind while creating a press release for your RPA.

1. Limit to 250 words or less.
2. Focus on current issues and 'hot topics' in the media.
3. Opening sentence should focus directly on the message that you are trying to convey.
4. Keep your letter simple and concise.

[http://www.bcclocalnews.com/vancouver\\_island\\_central/nanaimonewsbulletin/](http://www.bcclocalnews.com/vancouver_island_central/nanaimonewsbulletin/)

#### City wages, benefits increase at property owners' expense

To the Editor,

Re: Cities need to explore property tax alternatives, Dec. 2.

One of the largest expenses of the city – staff wages and benefits – is completely ignored in the article.

You have a city manager quitting and receiving an outrageous buyout and all manner of employees making in excess of \$100,000 a year plus extremely generous benefit and pension plans.

Nanaimo city employees are making a fantastic wage at the expense of the property owner. Employees are able to retire with a full pension and benefits as early as age 52.

Our city is being run just like Greece, and in case you haven't heard, Greece is bankrupt. A study out this week shows that the average city employee in B.C. is paid 35 per cent more than a private sector worker in a comparable position. This largess has to stop and we as taxpayers need to take control of the purse strings at city hall.

The first mayoralty candidate or councillor that indicates he or she is going to tackle this growing and out-of-control problem – and not just give it lip-service – has my vote and I am willing to bet the votes of many City of Nanaimo taxpayers.

Mark

Nanaimo

### Create a "Brand" event

A brand is something that uniquely identifies

your group and can be beneficial in creating



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publicity for your cause. For example, the Canadian Taxpayers Federation holds a mock Oscars ceremony each year called “The Teddies” which awards the best of the worst in government waste. The event is covered widely in the media each year and has helped brand the CTF as a whistle blower of government waste ... with a sense of humor!



A branding event is wide-open to creativity. It could be annual survey of utility and tax rates in a metropolitan area; or a report card measuring some aspect of government performance. What’s important is that it be consistent, associated strictly with your organization and unique.

Another example is the Fraser Institute’s annual Tax Freedom Day report which estimates the calendar day a taxpayer has stopped working for the three levels of government and started working for themselves.

The Interested Taxpayers Action Committee of West Vancouver came up with the idea of a “Muffin Index.” In reviewing the city’s budget, committee members learned that the city was spending about \$30,000 on catering muffins and donoughts for various meeting at city hall. The “Muffin Index” became an instant hit with the media and local ratepayers.

## Using Social Media

Social media can be an inexpensive and effective communication tool. In addition to a professional-looking website, your ratepayers group may want to use social media tools such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube or blogs to reach a wider range of people. You can create a group or a page on Facebook for people to join, an account on Twitter so others can follow your updates, a YouTube channel where you can post interviews, press conferences and news clips about your organization.

To ensure effectiveness and credibility, your social media tools should be regularly maintained, as dated materiel will give an impression of inactivity. Despite the informal

nature of social media, be careful to use correct spelling and grammar to convey a sense of professionalism. It is worth noting that a social





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media outlet is *not* meant to replace a website, but meant to augment and drive online traffic towards it.

While a social network site should be main-

tained for the organization; it's also a good idea to establish issue-specific pages when an issue is really hot (ie: a proposed tax increase is imminent or a big capital project is being excluded from voter approval).

### Commonly Used Social Media Websites:

#### **Facebook:** [facebook.com](https://www.facebook.com)

Facebook is a social networking tool with hundreds of millions of users worldwide. In 2010 fully half of all Canadians (yes, every man, woman and child) had their own Facebook page. By creating a Facebook fan page and inviting people to join it, people will have access to information, status updates, events, pictures, videos, links and anything else you choose to post. Facebook also allows for two-way, interactive discussions between your organization, its supporters and interested web-suffers.

#### **Twitter:** [twitter.com](https://www.twitter.com)

Twitter is a social networking resource known as "micro-blogging," limiting posts to 140 characters in order to deliver short, concise messages. Once you open a Twitter account, you can follow other groups and peoples' updates in addition to sharing your own. Twitter is an excellent way to post short updates and links related to your organization. Many well-known people (including politicians) use Twitter on a daily basis.

#### **YouTube:** [youtube.com](https://www.youtube.com)

YouTube allows people to upload, share and view videos. By creating a personal YouTube channel, you can easily upload footage from your RPA's latest press conference, rally, meet-

ing or presentation with local officials or scripted videos conveying a message in a TV-commercial format.

#### **Blogs:** [blogger.com](https://www.blogger.com) or [wordpress.com](https://www.wordpress.com)

Blogs are online "web-logs" that can be useful for commentary on issues related to your organization. RPAs that have their own website can include a blog using [wordpress.com](https://www.wordpress.com), or sign up for a free, stand-alone blog at [blogger.com](https://www.blogger.com). It is worth noting that blogs hosted by a RPA website generally appear more credible and help to drive online traffic to the main website.

#### **Linking**

Your website and social media outlets should create synergies – that is they work together towards meeting your group's goals. To assist in this, link each of these outlets with one another. For example, your website should include easy-to-find links to your Facebook fan page, Twitter account and YouTube channel; and visa-versa in all possible combinations. You may wish to include links to likeminded organizations like the Canadian Taxpayers Federation ([taxpayer.com](https://www.taxpayer.com)) and neighboring RPAs. By directing online traffic towards 'allies' you help to create an online network of activist-taxpayers fighting for a common goal: lower taxes, less waste and more accountable government, *at every level of government.*



# MUNICIPAL RATEPAYERS GUIDE

## Start a Petition

Capitalizing on strength in numbers, ratepayers can use a petition to inform and provide an outlet for people to exercise their opinions on a given policy or initiative. Petitions cannot only further the goal a RPA is trying to achieve, but they can introduce people to your organization. Your petition should:

1. Focus on a specific, targeted issue;
2. Identify the target, be it a mayor, councillor, candidate or local corporation;
3. Summarize the problem you are trying to address, the changes you are proposing and why the proposed changes are needed; and
4. Include three columns under the summary: name, email address and signature.

There are two different types of petitions: formal and informal.

### Formal Petitions

Formal petitions allow you to have your petition presented in a council chamber and recorded in the official record of proceedings. Formal petitions require a

protocol be followed (ie: how it is addressed, information required of signators, etc.). Like federal parliament and provincial legislatures, each municipal jurisdiction will have its own rules. You should check with city hall before launching a petition that you want read into the official record. Formal petitions may be beneficial for furthering your cause, but may not be the best option if your goal is to make a public statement or collect a large number of e-mail addresses.

**Canadian Taxpayers Federation**  
*Fighting for taxpayers*

## Petition

### Edmonton City Council Pay Raise

To Edmonton City Council:

**Whereas** on June 20, 2006 you voted in favour of a 21 per cent raise for city councillors and a 14 per cent raise for the mayor, while not allowing time for public debate.

**Whereas** on June 20, 2006 you voted to double dip by accepting massive raises when city council already receives annual salary adjustments based on the change in *Average Weekly Earnings of Albertans* (which gave you a 5.76% increase in 2006).

**Whereas** on June 20, 2006 you voted to increase your own severance pay from two weeks per year (maximum of 26 weeks) to three weeks per year (maximum of 36 weeks), creating a double standard as in the private sector no employee would be eligible for similar severance pay if they were fired or retired.

**Whereas** you did nothing to address the double standard and lack of transparency you enjoy by not having to pay tax on one-third of your salary and allowances, while Edmontonians have to pay tax on all of their salary.

**Whereas** you have received no mandate from the citizens of Edmonton to approve these lavish increases.

**We the undersigned urge Edmonton city council to put these recommendations you approved on June 20, 2006 to a plebiscite in conjunction with the 2007 civic election.**

NAME (print): \_\_\_\_\_ SIGNATURE: \_\_\_\_\_  
 ADDRESS: \_\_\_\_\_  
 NAME (print): \_\_\_\_\_ SIGNATURE: \_\_\_\_\_  
 ADDRESS: \_\_\_\_\_

Please copy and distribute. Mail completed petitions to the Canadian Taxpayers Federation #202, 10621 – 100<sup>th</sup> Avenue, Edmonton, AB T5J 0B3, or fax to 780-482-1744

06/06



‘petition delivery’ in which your RPA spokes-person holds a press conference while dropping off petitions with a willing (or sometimes unwilling) politician.

In building the membership of your RPA, petitions help you to build a list of individuals who may be interested in joining or supporting your group. Informal petitions do not require as much personal information either, which makes people more likely to sign. To do this most effectively, consider using free online petition hosting like those found at [petitiononline.com](http://petitiononline.com).

For more information about formal petitions, visit: [ontla.on.ca/web/go2.jsp?Page=/gettinginvolved/petitions&menuItem=getting\\_involved\\_petition&locale=en](http://ontla.on.ca/web/go2.jsp?Page=/gettinginvolved/petitions&menuItem=getting_involved_petition&locale=en)

### Informal Petitions

Informal petitions are not designed or intended to be

presented in a legislative chamber. However, informal petitions are generally more effective in affecting public policy change and in helping a build a base of supporters for your RPA. An example of an informal petition would be a

### Privacy Policy

It’s important that if you are going to use petition names for anything other than delivery to the addressed lawmaker or body (ie: information on other campaigns, requests for donations, etc.), that your group have a privacy policy that spells out how personal information will be treated. The CTF’s privacy policy can be viewed [here](#).

## Conduct a Candidate Survey

A common tool used by advocacy groups are ‘candidate surveys’ during municipal elections. These surveys are often effective at both ascertaining what candidates stand for, raising awareness of your group’s issues and above all, getting candidates on record before they become elected officials. This is one tool that effectively helps hold them accountable.

### Crafting a Survey

In order to increase the chances that candidates will fill out and return your group’s survey, questions should be kept short, few in

number, and simple as possible. Candidates should be given enough time to complete the surveys, but also a firm deadline by which it must be submitted. Additionally, you should call each candidate’s campaign office to ensure that you are sending the survey to the correct e-mail address. Lastly, word your group’s questions carefully to ensure that it is not based on any subjective premise. For example, “*Will you stop wasting taxpayers’ money?*” requires one to first accept that taxpayers’ money is being wasted, and even implies that the candidate him/herself is wasting money. While this may well be the case in some circumstances, a more



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appropriately worded question would be, "Will you commit to launching a spending review commission to identify areas of waste?"

Candidates often receive a high volume of surveys in the duration of a campaign, so remembering these points may greatly increase the chances that you will receive a response. Sometimes however, a candidate will refuse

to respond regardless of how accommodating your group is. This is sometimes – although not always - the result of candidates being weak on the issues raised in your group’s survey. When this is the case, you may wish to find alternative methods of identifying where they stand issues, but be careful to never assume anything and to fully cite your sources.

### Survey Template



Dear (INSERT CANDIDATE NAME):

The Canadian Taxpayers Federation (CTF) is a non-partisan, non-profit advocacy organization committed to lower taxes, less waste and more government accountability. We have 74,000 supporters nation-wide.

During elections, we regularly provide information to our supporters as to where various candidates stand on issues important to them.

As such we have prepared a five-question survey for you to complete. Your response will be released publicly on our website: [www.taxpayer.com](http://www.taxpayer.com) as well as sent directly to our supporters in Ottawa.

**Please complete the following survey and fax it back to 613-234-7748 or e-mail it to [dfildebrandt@taxpayer.com](mailto:dfildebrandt@taxpayer.com) by Friday, October 8, 2010.**

1. Do you support limiting annual property tax bill increases to Ottawa’s inflation rate?  
Yes                      No                      Undecided
2. Do you support requiring referendums for any new tax or tax increase beyond Ottawa’s inflation rate?  
Yes                      No                      Undecided
3. Will you lobby the provincial government to allow Ontario municipalities to put in place ‘recall’ mechanisms for elected officials?  
Yes                      No                      Undecided
4. Do you support structural reform of the City of Ottawa to give local communities more control over their affairs using a ‘borough model’?  
Yes                      No                      Undecided
5. Will you pro-actively disclose publicly a list of who contributed to your campaign and in what amount prior to the October 25 vote?  
Yes                      No                      Undecided

**Candidate information:**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_



# SECTION III: The Beggars Checklist

The *Beggar’s Checklist* outlines proposed policy initiatives and questions that an RPA could challenge a council with before it makes a decision to raise taxes or go “begging” to a higher level of government.

## Executive Summary

Across Canada, municipal politicians are routinely seen begging for financial assistance from other levels of government. While many municipalities claim to be financially ‘helpless’, there are however, plenty of initiatives that they *could* undertake to reduce costs or raise revenues through legitimate means; they just have to roll up their sleeves and get to work.

As this document shows, there are several great initiatives being undertaken by municipalities in Canada and around the world. When municipal politicians get together for conferences, they need to stop putting the focus on brainstorming new taxing powers and start sharing innovative solutions which can save taxpayers money.

Developed in the form of a “to do” list, the “beggar’s checklist” is a tool for provincial and federal politicians to use when municipal politicians come asking for money. The list includes initiatives that municipalities should have to complete before simply asking another level of government for money.

*The complete “Beggars Checklist’ can be found by [clicking here](#).*

**THE BEGGAR’S CHECKLIST**

*“Has your municipality...”*

- 1) Brought staff **salaries** in-line with the private sector?
- 2) **Contracted out** services wherever possible?
- 3) Utilized **public private partnerships** for capital projects?
- 4) Sold **surplus land and assets**?
- 5) Converted services to **user fees**?
- 6) Sought **volunteers** for the delivery of city services?
- 7) Refocused activities on **core services**?
- 8) Raised revenues for services through **sponsorship** activities?
- 9) **Partnered** with other governments for service delivery?
- 10) Utilized new **technology** to reduce costs?





# SECTION IV: A Property Tax Cap

Released by the CTF in November 2008, *A Property Tax Cap* is a proposal to limit annual property tax increases. It could be practiced at the local level, but it is aimed primarily at provincial lawmakers. An RPA may wish to champion some or all of its recommendations and work with other RPAs to support its implementation.

## Summary of Recommendations

To limit property tax increases and create more accountable municipal governments, the CTF recommends the following:

- A property Tax Cap pegging residential property tax rates at current levels. Over a ten-year period, the property tax rates for all other property classifications would be reduced to the residential rate, reaching a single property tax (mill) rate in each local jurisdiction.
- The value at which a property is currently assessed would become the assessed value for the purposes of this model. Any adjustment in the assessed value for the current property owner would be tied to the rate of inflation as determined on a provincial level by Statistics Canada.
- When a property is sold, the sales price becomes the new assessed value.
- Provincial statute should allow for either higher or lower property tax rates by referenda and citizen initiatives, placed on the regular municipal ballot.
- The CTF recommends a shift toward a fee for service system for as many municipal services as possible.
- Each municipality must produce a consumption of services report and implement activity-based costing.
- Municipalities in Canada must continue to look for innovative Alternative Service Delivery, Public Private Partnerships, and the privatization or outsourcing of non-core city assets to cut the cost of local government (see the *Section III: Beggars Checklist*).
- Provinces must define municipal responsibilities and stop downloading services onto municipalities in the same way that municipalities should not be 'uptaking' services that are the proper jurisdiction provincial or federal governments.



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### Introduction

Residents and business owners across Canada are rightly concerned about rising property taxes. A property Tax Cap, as proposed by the CTF, would create defined and predictable *revenues* for municipal governments and defined and predictable *payments* for local ratepayers.

Property taxes are the primary source of funding for municipal governments. In theory, property taxes pay for the services received from these local governments. When the amount of tax paid is the same as the cost of services received by the property owner, the service-level decisions made by municipal governments can be fairly efficient. Unfortunately, municipal politicians have a strong incentive to tax some properties at higher rates, such as business properties, to subsidize taxes paid on other properties, such as residential properties. This is because residential property owners vote in local elections but business property owners may not, and so may have no say in their level of taxation or services.

For a municipal government – spending, not revenue – determines the tax burden borne by ratepayers, creating an upside down budgeting process. Municipal governments determine how much they are going to spend *then* determine the tax rates necessary to pay for that spending. Federal and provincial governments, on the other hand, take into account existing tax rates and projected revenues *before* considering what items to spend on. As a result of the focus on spending, local tax rates tend to change year-over-year based on the spending wish lists of local councilors.

A property Tax Cap would be the first step in turning municipal budgeting right-side-up. It would force local governments to prioritize spending and focus on core activities, fundamental to the operation of a community. Core activities include police, fire and public works. Activities that are

not fundamental to the operation of a local economy – non-core activities – including social and recreational services, are better provided by other levels of government or the private sector.

According to our Constitution, the role of municipal government is determined by provincial legislation. Therefore, the CTF proposes provincial governments establish a cap on property taxes. Provinces must define municipal responsibilities and stop downloading services onto municipalities in the same way that municipalities should not be ‘uptaking’ services that belong to provincial or federal governments. This is particularly important today as municipal governments are lobbying heavily for new taxing powers. Once the budgeting process is turned right-side-up and revenues play a primary instead of secondary role in local budgets, the unpredictability of wild swings in municipal taxation should decline.

A public opinion poll done for the Canadian Taxpayers Federation (CTF) showed that 68% of respondents support the property Tax Cap model. A Tax Cap provision would limit annual increases in property taxes, but allow for tax rate increases or reductions through referenda and citizen initiatives. That poll also showed that 58% of respondents were in favour of more fees for service to fund local services.

The paper further recommends equality in tax rates across property classes. Businesses are becoming more mobile, so municipalities must now become more aware of the effects of discriminatory property taxation. High property taxes may affect the location decisions of new businesses and whether existing businesses will stay open or move to friendlier jurisdictions. Discriminatory business property taxes represent a hidden tax to residents reflected in higher prices, less job creation and lower wages. Both federally and



## MUNICIPAL RATEPAYERS GUIDE

provincially, governments are lowering business taxes to create a better business climate. It's time municipalities did the same.

A Tax Cap would provide predictability for homeowners, businesses and local government. It would give local politicians the tool to say 'no' to incessant demands to increase spending from

special interest groups with non-core agendas. Finally, it turns local budgeting right-side-up by putting ratepayers in control rather than spend-happy local councils.

The full paper provides a basic outline that is general in scope and could be applied in any province.

### Property Tax Principles

The CTF is guided by the following principles in creating its TaxCap recommendations.

- **Transparency and Accountability:** Provincially mandated programs such as schools, social services and public health should be funded and operated entirely by provinces. Properties should not be taxed for these programs. Further, transfers between different levels of government cloud transparency and create additional costs as services overlap or are even duplicated. Each level of government federal, provincial and municipal should be responsible for a clearly defined set of services and activities. A clear understanding of who taxes and spends for what purpose is at the heart of accountability. Blurring that line blurs accountability;
- **Cost-benefit analysis:** A municipality must first determine whether it should provide a service or undertake a project and if so, examine best alternatives in terms of cost, ratepayer risk, transparency, measurable outcome and accountability. These options include: privatization, contracting out, alternative service delivery models and public private part-

nerships (P3s);

- **Fee for Service:** Municipalities must remove services from the property tax base that can be paid for by individuals such as utilities, water, garbage, recreational facilities, etc. Property taxes should be limited to core activities that cannot be billed for on an individual basis such as fire and police departments, roads, traffic signals, and snow removal;
- **Uniformity:** Business and residential properties should be taxed at similar rates;
- **Simplicity:** Lower, simpler and transparent taxes with few exemptions are preferable to convoluted schemes of refunds, credits, grants, exemptions, etc;
- **Ratepayer Empowerment:** Local ratepayers must be assured of an end to the volatility found in the current property tax system by incorporating a Tax Cap provision that would limit annual increases in property taxes, while allowing for tax rate increases or reductions through referenda and citizen initiatives.

*The full Property Tax Cap Paper can be found by [clicking here](#).*



# SECTION V: Toward More Efficient Municipal Government in Canada

*In 2007 and 2008, the CTF commissioned municipal government expert Bruce Hollands to write a three-part series on local government efficiency. These articles are provided here under the title **Toward More Efficient Municipal Government in Canada** as a reference for ideas of where and how local councils can save ratepayers a bundle.*

## Municipalities - A Growing Force, A Growing Concern

In Canada, the power of municipalities continues to grow, something that could have serious effects on taxpayers if left unchecked. Several landmark court decisions - some that include the Supreme Court of Canada - have granted municipalities greater discretionary authority and operating freedom ...

As well, billions of dollars have been transferred from the federal, provincial and territorial governments to municipalities for infrastructure renewal - exceeding \$20 billion since the 1990s. Most taxpayers are unaware of this financial assistance, and rarely are these revenues mentioned in discussions about fiscally strapped municipalities. Instead, we are reminded by organizations like the Federation of Canadian Municipalities (FCM) and the 18 provincial and territorial municipal associations that local governments collect only 8 cents on every tax dollar, and that the provinces and federal government receive the lion's share: 42 cents and 50 cents from every dollar, respectively. The notion that municipalities need greater revenues from senior levels of government may appear to have merit.

However, municipal spending has not been adequately scrutinized to fully support the concept. Are purchasing processes as competitive as they can be? Could Canadian municipalities operate more efficiently? Have alternative delivery mechanisms been fully exploited? Are municipalities doing too many things, allowing core services to suffer? This three-part series on efficiency in municipal government, tells the real story of growth in local government revenues ...

***Canadian Bruce Hollands is a former government relations consultant, public affairs columnist and radio commentator. He served as Vice President at the Federation of Canadian Municipalities and worked for industry and government, specializing in the municipal sector. Bruce is now Executive Director of the PVC Pipe Association, a non-profit organization based in Dallas, Texas. He can be reached at [bhollands@uni-bell.org](mailto:bhollands@uni-bell.org).***

***His full three-part series be found by [clicking here](#).***