Strathroy-Caradoc Council Watch

Independent municipal research by John Farrugia

Three CAOs, One Term

How the town's top staff job changed hands, 2023-2026

Publication details

Report: Three CAOs, One Term - the town's Chief Administrative Officer (CAO) and Treasurer positions from March 2023 to October 2026: who held them, how they were hired and how they left, what the interim CAO's contracts say, the CAO's housing payments, and the recruitment firms the town paid

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Records reviewed through: October 31, 2026 (Council minutes posted to October 5, 2026; agendas to November 5, 2026; payment listings to September 24, 2026)

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About this review

This is a resident-led, independent review of public records. It was not commissioned or endorsed by the Municipality of Strathroy-Caradoc or any other body, it is not an audit and gives no audit assurance, and it is not based on complete access to internal records.

Sources: Council minutes, agendas, staff reports and by-laws on eScribe; meeting video; the cheque listings attached to Council agendas; the town's budget and web pages; the province's official salary disclosure files; Mayoral Decisions; the interim CAO's contracts; and local news, including the Mayor's radio interviews.

Video and radio quotes come from machine transcripts; where two independent transcripts exist, they agree. None was checked by ear. Payment totals were added up from the payment listings, which give a short description, not what each payment bought. Salary figures are the province's official files.

Council Watch sent its questions to the Clerk on November 1, 2026; answers will be added to this report as dated updates. It uses one earlier answer from the town: the HR Director's email of October 21, 2026, about the Treasurer. It also uses the interim CAO's two employment contracts, released under freedom-of-information requests with pay blacked out, copies of which a resident supplied. Personnel matters are confidential, and no official reason has been published for any CAO's departure; this report does not suggest one. Where only the town can answer, the report says so.

Some documents were provided to this review privately and may not be public. They are marked 'copy provided to this review' in the references, with their date and issuer where known; readers cannot inspect them online, and this review has not independently authenticated them beyond comparing them with the public record.

Research and drafting were done with the help of an AI tool (Claude, by Anthropic), working from the sources listed. I chose the topics, supplied some documents, reviewed the text, and am responsible for the published content.

This is a summary of public records, not legal advice or an audit. Section 4 lists questions the record leaves open. None is shown to break any rule, and each comes with a possible innocent explanation. Council Watch doesn't know which explanation is true. How each member voted is given only where the minutes record it. Findings reflect information available through October 31, 2026 (Council minutes posted to October 5, 2026; agendas to November 5, 2026; payment listings to September 24, 2026). If you find an error, please send the source and it will be corrected; changes are listed under 'Updates and corrections' at the end.

In short

- Since the 2022 election the town has had three CAOs, and no permanent one since February 2025. Fred Tranquilli resigned in March 2023 and later became CAO of Perth South Township. Trisha McKibbin, hired in August 2023, was relieved of her duties on February 13, 2025, the day Council met in private for her annual review. Rob Browning has been interim CAO since February 18, 2025; his contract runs to December 2, 2026. No reason has been published for either departure. [1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7]
- Mr. Browning's first offer letter is dated February 11, 2025, and he accepted it on February 12, the day before that meeting. The Mayor has said he signed for the town on February 18, the night Council passed the by-law appointing him; the contract's dates fit that account. [6, 8, 9]
- His current contract, released under a freedom-of-information request, has him working up to 30 hours a week, with the option to work from home. He reports to the Mayor, who approves his expenses and time off and, in advance, his housing costs. The Mayor signed it three weeks after ordering an audit of the CAO's housing expenses; the audit's result hasn't been made public, and no public record shows Council approving the new terms. [10, 11, 12]
- Housing: the first contract paid a $2,000 monthly allowance. In 2025 the town paid $2,125 a month to its own housing corporation instead; the Mayor said the extra $125 was his own decision and should have come to Council. [8, 13, 14]
- Pay: the 2025 salary list shows Ms. McKibbin paid $143,415.25 for a year in which she worked about six weeks; what it covers isn't public. The lists show no payment of $100,000 or more to Mr. Tranquilli after he left. The long-time Treasurer has retired, and the job was posted in September 2026. [15, 16, 17]
- A companion Council Watch report, 'Who Watches the Watchers?' (published November 2, 2026), covers the town's watchdog contract. [18]

Words used in this report

Term	What it means here
CAO	Chief Administrative Officer, the town's top employee. Council hires the CAO, and the CAO runs the staff.
Interim and acting CAO	An interim CAO is hired for a set period while there is no permanent CAO. An acting CAO is a staff member filling in for a short time.
By-law and resolution	A by-law is a formal town law. A resolution is a decision Council makes by vote.
Closed session	Part of a Council meeting held in private. The law allows it for some subjects, such as matters about an identifiable employee.
Strong-mayor powers	Provincial rules, in force in Strathroy-Caradoc from May 1, 2025, that give the Mayor some powers on his own, used through written Mayoral Decisions.
Salary list	The Ontario Public Sector Salary Disclosure (the 'Sunshine List'): everyone a public employer paid $100,000 or more in a year. It counts what was paid in that calendar year, not a yearly salary rate.
Payment listings	The lists of town payments attached to Council agendas.
Machine captions	Text made automatically by computer from meeting video or radio audio. They can contain errors and were not checked by ear.
Possible innocent explanation	A reasonable, harmless reason that could explain something that looks odd. This report gives one for every open question. It is not a finding: Council Watch doesn't know whether it is the true reason. It is there so a gap in the record isn't read as proof of wrongdoing.

1. The CAO

Timeline

Date	What happened	Source
Mar 10, 2023	CAO/Clerk Fred Tranquilli resigns; the town gives no reason, and the Mayor says 'no comment'	[1]
Mar 20, 2023	Treasurer Bill Dakin named acting CAO (By-law 16-23). Council names the Mayor, Deputy Mayor McGuire and Councillor Kennes to the hiring committee	[19]
Jul 4, 2023	Mr. Tranquilli starts as CAO of Perth South Township	[2]
Jul 14, 2023	Trisha McKibbin's hire announced; she starts Aug 21 (By-law 62-23, Sep 5, 2023)	[3, 20]
Feb 3, 2025	Council sets Feb 13 for the annual CAO review (moved Councillor Derbyshire, seconded Mayor Grantham, carried)	[21]
Feb 11-12, 2025	Offer letter to Rob Browning dated Feb 11; he accepts on Feb 12	[8]
Feb 13, 2025	Special meeting: closed session for the 'Annual CAO Review', then the 'direction given' is approved in public. Ms. McKibbin is relieved of her duties	[4, 5]
Feb 14, 2025	The town announces the change and names Mr. Browning interim CAO	[5]
Feb 18, 2025	By-law 27-25 appoints Mr. Browning interim CAO (moved Deputy Mayor McGuire, seconded Councillor Pelkman, carried)	[6]
Nov 3-12, 2025	Closed session on an 'Employee Contract' (Nov 3); second contract dated Nov 7 and signed Nov 9-12	[10, 12]
Feb 17 - Mar 16, 2026	Director Rob Lilbourne acting CAO for one month, between the two contracts	[22]
Dec 2, 2026	The interim CAO's contract ends, about two weeks after the new Council takes office	[10]

Votes: none of these decisions was a recorded vote, so the minutes don't show how each member voted.

Who held the job, and the contracts

- Four people have led the town's staff since 2019: Gregory McClinchey (to Nov 2019), Fred Tranquilli (to Mar 2023), Trisha McKibbin (Aug 2023 - Feb 2025; myFM reported she was 'relieved of her duties'), and interim CAO Rob Browning (from Feb 18, 2025; By-law 27-25, moved Deputy Mayor McGuire, seconded Councillor Pelkman, carried). Treasurer Bill Dakin was acting CAO in between (Mar - Aug 2023). [1, 3, 5, 6, 19]
- The town extended the interim contract to December 2, 2026 (town notice, Nov 21, 2025). No by-law or public vote naming the extension was found. On Nov 3, 2025, Council approved in public an unnamed decision made in closed session on 'Employee Performance/Employee Contract' (moved Deputy Mayor McGuire, seconded Councillor Pelkman, carried). No search for a permanent CAO was found. The Mayor told local radio the extension 'allows the next council to pick their CAO' (machine transcript). [7, 12, 23, 24]
- Pay (Ontario Sunshine List, official figures): Tranquilli $174,112.10 (2022); McKibbin $171,599.92 (2024). The 2025 list shows both McKibbin ($143,415.25, for a year in which she worked about six weeks) and Browning ($159,560.29, with $0.00 in taxable benefits). The list doesn't say what McKibbin's 2025 amount covers. After Mr. Tranquilli left in March 2023 he became CAO of Perth

South Township (from July 2023). The lists show no payment of $100,000 or more to him from Strathroy-Caradoc in 2023 or later; a year's salary after he left would normally have put him on the town's 2023 list. [2, 15]

The interim CAO's contracts aren't posted publicly. By-law 27-25, which appointed him, is one page with no end date or pay terms. A resident gave Council Watch copies of his two contracts, which the town released under freedom-of-information requests with his pay blacked out. What the contracts and the record show: [8, 10, 25]

- The first contract. The offer letter is dated Feb 11, 2025. It ran from Feb 18, 2025 to 'on or before February 18, 2026', full time on weekdays, with duties set by Council or someone Council chooses. It gave a 'monthly accommodation allowance of $2,000' and no group benefits (the salary list also shows $0.00 in benefits). The Mayor and the HR Director signed it, without dates. Mr. Browning dated his acceptance by hand '25/02/12', that is, Feb 12, 2025. [8, 15]
- When the first contract was signed. Mr. Browning accepted on Feb 12, the day before Council's Feb 13 special meeting. At that meeting Council went into closed session for the 'Annual CAO Review' and then approved, in public, the 'direction given' in closed session; the minutes don't name anyone. The town announced the change on Feb 14. On Feb 19 the Mayor told local radio 'there was no contract between Mr. Browning and the municipality prior to the announcement.' On Mar 31 he said Mr. Browning had signed 'I believe two days before'; that he himself signed only when the HR Director brought it to him on Tuesday, February 18; that the agreement was 'just a recommendation'; and that Mr. Browning didn't become CAO until Council passed the by-law that night. The contract's dates fit that later account (machine transcripts). [4, 5, 6, 8, 9, 26]
- The second contract. The offer letter is dated Nov 7, 2025, four days after the Nov 3 closed session on an 'Employee Contract'. The HR Director signed it electronically on Nov 9, the Mayor on Nov 10 and Mr. Browning on Nov 12. It runs from Mar 16, 2026 to 'on or before December 2, 2026'. It changes four things. [10, 12]
- He reports 'directly to the Mayor on a daily basis', and the Mayor approves his time off and his expenses. (Duties are still set by Council or someone Council chooses.) [10]
- Housing is no longer a flat allowance. He is repaid for documented housing costs 'while attending work in Strathroy', and 'all accommodation expenses require the prior approval of the Mayor'. [10]
- He is paid by the hour for 'up to 30 hours per week' and may work from home 'as required'. The first contract was full time, weekdays 8:30 to 4:30. [8, 10]
- If he is let go without cause, he gets a 'retiring allowance' (amount blacked out) in exchange for giving up all claims against the town, its staff, the Mayor and councillors. The first contract allowed only the legal minimum. [8, 10]
- The month between contracts. The first contract ended on or before Feb 18, 2026, and the second began Mar 16, 2026. On Feb 17, 2026 Council made Director Rob Lilbourne acting CAO for that month (the chair: 'only for a month', machine captions). The record doesn't say why there was a gap. [8, 10, 22]
- Who approved the second contract. No by-law or public resolution setting its terms was found. In July 2025, using the strong-mayor rules, the Mayor gave Council the power to hire or fire the CAO (MD 2025-01). [12, 24, 27]

- Housing. On Oct 6, 2025, the minutes record the HR Director telling Council the CAO's housing was 'being paid directly to the Strathroy-Caradoc Housing in the amount of $2125', that 'the housing allowance per the CAO's contract is not being paid no longer', and that the town was 'covering the additional $125'. The first contract set the allowance at $2,000 a month, so the $125 was the difference. The Mayor said the $125 was his own decision and should have come to Council. The payment listings show four payments of $2,125.00 to the Caradoc Housing Corporation (June to September 2025, $8,500 in all), one labelled 'CAO RENT'. No such payments appear after September 2025; the listings don't show whether the arrangement changed. [8, 13, 14]
- Repayments to the CAO. The listings show 21 payments to the CAO himself, March 2025 to September 2026, $21,082.19 in all, labelled 'Employee Reimbursement' or 'Employee Expense Reimbursement'. The largest was $8,968.75 on May 14, 2025. From April 2026, when the second contract's repayment terms applied, they come about every two weeks ($213.63 to $1,078.87). The listings don't say what any of them were for, or how much was for housing. [10, 14]
- A request for records. On Oct 20, 2025, Councillor Derbyshire moved that Council 'receive all relevant financial records, including bank transfers, cheques' behind 'a previously submitted financial spreadsheet'. As he read it out, it was about payroll and repayment of the CAO's housing allowance (machine captions). It lost (seconded Councillor Willsie; no recorded vote). [28, 29]
- An audit. The same day, Mayoral Decision MD 2025-06 told the Director of Legal and Legislative Services to 'engage MNP to initiate an audit into expenditures related to accommodation expenses incurred by the Chief Administrative Officer'. No result has been made public. MNP was paid $5,932.50 on Dec 11, 2025, but the listing doesn't link it to this audit. On Dec 1, 2025, Council met in closed session on an item headed 'Employee Accommodations'; the minutes say it received a report and gave no direction to staff. [11, 14, 30]
- Earlier work for the town. Before he was CAO, Mr. Browning worked with Cash & Associates / Municipal Strategic Planning Associates. He helped run Council's March 2024 strategic plan workshop and presented the Police Services Board's strategic plan in May 2024. After he became CAO, the town paid Cash & Associates $16,122.74 (May 2025 - Jan 2026), including a payment labelled 'Council Visioning'. David Cash led Council's Vision 2055 workshops on May 12 and 26, 2025. The minutes show no Council approval for that work, but staff can approve smaller purchases themselves. The record doesn't show whether Mr. Browning still had any link with the firm. [14, 31, 32, 33, 34]

2. The Treasurer

- Bill Dakin held the role from at least July 2018 (Council minutes list him as Director of Financial Services/Treasurer) until he retired in 2026. No retirement date has been published; Council said goodbye to him on Sep 21, 2026. The job was posted Sep 11, 2026 (closing Oct 15, 2026) at $134,862 to $168,587 a year. On October 21, 2026 the town said it was choosing people to interview. Lindsay Laskey is listed as Manager of Accounting / Deputy Treasurer. [15, 16, 17, 35, 36]
- Dakin's official pay: $127,166.56 (2022) to $152,716.99 (2025). [15]

3. Recruitment firms

- The town paid Waterhouse Executive Search $22,035.00 twice in 2025 (July 24 and November 13), $44,070 in all. [14]
- Waterhouse ran the town's 2025 search for a Manager of Building Services / Chief Building Official (applications closed June 13, 2025). Council appointed the new Chief Building Official on July 21, 2025, three days before the first payment. The link between the two rests only on the dates. [37, 38]
- The second payment is labelled 'Recruitment - Water Dept'. The town advertised a Manager of Environmental Services on its own job board in July 2025 (closing August 5, 2025). The ad doesn't name a search firm, and the record doesn't show which search Waterhouse ran for this payment. [14, 39]
- Neither payment is labelled as a CAO search, and no town CAO search was found; the interim CAO has served since Feb 2025. (A Waterhouse CAO search, budgeted at $27,000, that Deputy Mayor McGuire described in his County Council report on Apr 22, 2025 was Middlesex County's, not the town's; machine captions.) [24, 40]

4. Questions the record leaves open

These are points where the public record doesn't match a rule or leaves a gap. None is shown to break a rule. Each comes with a possible innocent explanation: Council Watch doesn't know whether it is the true one. It is there because a gap in the record is not proof that anyone did wrong.

1. The wording of the election-period by-law

During an election, an outgoing Council's powers are limited (often called the 'lame-duck' period). By-law 39-26 (May 4, 2026) gives the CAO, from nomination day until the new Council starts, 'authority to hire or remove any officer or employee'. But the Act doesn't let Council hand over the appointment or removal of an officer it must have, such as the Treasurer or Clerk (s.23.3(1)). Possible innocent explanation: read sensibly, the CAO hires the person and Council still appoints the Treasurer by by-law. Worth watching when the new Treasurer is appointed. [41, 42, 43]

2. Who approves the CAO's costs

Under the second contract, the Mayor approves the CAO's expenses and time off, and approves all his housing costs in advance. The Mayor signed that contract on Nov 10, 2025: three weeks after he ordered the MNP audit of the CAO's housing expenses (Oct 20), and three weeks before Council received an 'Employee Accommodations' report in closed session (Dec 1). On Oct 6, 2025 the Mayor had told Council that the extra $125 on the CAO's housing payments (paid monthly, per the listings) was his own decision and, in hindsight, should have come to Council. No public record shows Council approving the new terms (the Mayor's approval role, the 30-hour week, the payout clause) or what the audit found. Possible innocent explanation: repaying documented, approved costs is a tighter control than a flat allowance, and may be the fix the audit concerns called for; Council may have approved the terms in its Nov 3 closed session; and a CAO's expenses have to be approved by someone. [8, 10, 11, 12, 13, 30]

3. The first offer came before Council's meeting

The first offer letter is dated Feb 11, 2025, and Mr. Browning accepted it on Feb 12, before Council's Feb 13 closed meeting. The minutes of that meeting record only that 'direction' was given. The record doesn't show who decided to make the offer, or when Council first discussed Mr. Browning. Possible innocent explanation: staff often prepare an offer ahead of an expected decision; the Mayor said members had been consulted beforehand ('Everyone knew', machine transcript); and the offer bound the town only once it was signed for the town (on Feb 18, the Mayor says) and Council passed By-law 27-25 in public that night. [4, 6, 8, 9]

5. What happens next

- The interim CAO's contract ends on or before Dec 2, 2026, about two weeks after the new Council takes office on Nov 15. The Mayor said in 2025 that the next Council should pick the permanent CAO. No search had been posted by October 31, 2026. [10, 23, 24]
- A new Treasurer is being hired. During the election period the CAO can hire staff under By-law 39-26, but the Treasurer must still be appointed by Council (see question 1). [16, 17, 41]
- Council Watch sent questions to the Clerk on November 1, 2026, including who approved the second contract and under what authority, what the MNP audit found, and what the town has paid in total for the CAO's housing. Answers will be added to this report as dated updates.
- Council Watch will update this report as these decisions are made.

References - clickable links

Each number in the text jumps to its reference below; 'back to text' links return to each place the source is cited (in order of appearance). Titles link to the source itself; a link checks where a source is, not that it supports the claim.

1. myFM, Mar 10, 2023: CAO Tranquilli resigns back to text: 1 2 3

2. The Ranch 100.1 FM, June 2023: Perth South appoints Fred Tranquilli as its new CAO (start July 4, 2023) back to text: 1 2 3

3. Council minutes Sep 5, 2023: By-law 62-23, CAO back to text: 1 2 3

4. Council minutes Feb 13, 2025 (special meeting): closed session 'Annual CAO Review'; direction approved back to text: 1 2 3 4

5. myFM, Feb 14, 2025: CAO McKibbin relieved of duties back to text: 1 2 3 4 5

6. Council minutes Feb 18, 2025: By-law 27-25, interim CAO back to text: 1 2 3 4 5 6

7. Town news notice, Interim CAO contract extended, Nov 21, 2025 back to text: 1 2

8. Offer of temporary employment as interim CAO, letter dated Feb 11, 2025, accepted Feb 12, 2025 (released under freedom-of-information request FOI 2025-03 with pay blacked out; copy supplied to Council Watch by a resident; not public) *(not publicly accessible - readers cannot inspect it online)* back to text: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12

9. myFM, Mar 31, 2025: Minute With the Mayor, CAO hiring timeline (audio; two machine transcripts that agree) back to text: 1 2 3

10. Offer of temporary employment as CAO, letter dated Nov 7, 2025, e-signed Nov 9-12, 2025 (released under a freedom-of-information request with pay blacked out; copy supplied to Council Watch by a resident; not public) *(not publicly accessible - readers cannot inspect it online)* back to text: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13

11. Mayoral Decision MD 2025-06, Initiate Audit for CAO Expenses (Oct 20, 2025) back to text: 1 2 3

12. Council minutes Nov 3, 2025: closed session 'Employee Performance/Employee Contract'; direction approved in open session back to text: 1 2 3 4 5 6

13. Council minutes Oct 6, 2025: HR Director on the CAO's accommodation back to text: 1 2 3

14. Municipality of Strathroy-Caradoc cheque listings attached to Council agendas, January 2024 - September 24, 2026 (20 listings; latest shown) back to text: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7

15. Ontario Public Sector Salary Disclosure, official files 2019-2025 (employer 'Township Of Strathroy-Caradoc') back to text: 1 2 3 4 5

16. Email from the town's HR Director to Council Watch, Oct 21, 2026 (copy provided to this review; not public) *(not publicly accessible - readers cannot inspect it online)* back to text: 1 2 3

17. Job posting, Director of Financial Services / Treasurer, Sep 11 - Oct 15, 2026 (aggregator copy; the town's own posting has expired) back to text: 1 2 3

18. Council Watch, 'Who Watches the Watchers?', published November 2, 2026 back to text: 1

19. Council minutes Mar 20, 2023: By-law 16-23, Acting CAO back to text: 1 2

20. myFM, Jul 14, 2023: municipality announces new CAO (Trisha McKibbin) back to text: 1

21. Council minutes Feb 3, 2025: item 9.2, date set for the annual CAO review back to text: 1

22. Council minutes Feb 17, 2026: acting CAO for one month back to text: 1 2

23. myFM, Nov 18, 2025: CAO renewed as interim until post-2026 election (Mayor's audio; machine transcript) back to text: 1 2

24. Council Watch search of council minutes, agendas and meeting captions, Sep 16, 2025 - Oct 2026 *(public record; no stable direct link)* back to text: 1 2 3 4

25. By-law 27-25, appointment of the interim CAO back to text: 1

26. myFM, Feb 19, 2025: the Mayor on the CAO change (audio; machine transcript) back to text: 1

27. Mayoral Decision MD 2025-01, CAO (Jul 7, 2025) back to text: 1

28. Council minutes Oct 20, 2025: notice of motion 9.1, records request back to text: 1

29. Council meeting video, Oct 20, 2025, about 01:45:03-01:46:55 (automatic captions; not checked against playback) back to text: 1

30. Council minutes Dec 1, 2025: closed-session report 'Employee Accommodations' back to text: 1 2

31. Special Council minutes Mar 26, 2024: strategic plan workshop back to text: 1

32. Police Services Board minutes May 22, 2024: strategic plan presentation back to text: 1

33. Report CAO-2025-12 (Jun 16, 2025) back to text: 1

34. Purchasing Policy, By-law 105-24 (in force Nov 18, 2024 - Apr 20, 2026); now Procurement By-law 37-26 back to text: 1

35. Council minutes Jul 16, 2018 (old council calendar, archived copy): staff present *(public record; no stable direct link)* back to text: 1

36. Council meeting video, Sep 21, 2026, about 01:35:29-01:43:20, farewell to the Treasurer (machine captions; not checked against playback) back to text: 1

37. Career ad, Manager of Building Services / Chief Building Official (Waterhouse Executive Search, 2025) back to text: 1

38. Council minutes Jul 21, 2025: By-law 84-25, Chief Building Official back to text: 1

39. Job ad, Manager of Environmental Services, Municipality of Strathroy-Caradoc, closing Aug 5, 2025 (aggregator copy) back to text: 1

40. Council meeting video, Apr 22, 2025, about 02:24:37-02:24:52, County Council report (automatic captions; not checked against playback) back to text: 1

41. By-law 39-26, delegation during the lame-duck period (Council May 4, 2026) back to text: 1 2

42. Council minutes May 4, 2026: By-law 39-26 back to text: 1

43. Municipal Act, 2001, ss.5(3), 23.3, 223.3, 223.13, 239.1, 239.2 back to text: 1

Updates and corrections

Update = new information or later developments. Correction = something previously inaccurate or misleading. Oldest entry first.

Date	Type	Section	What changed	Reason and source	Changes a finding?
November 4, 2026	Original publication	-	First public release. Review drafts (October 30 - November 1, 2026) were shared privately before release.	-	-