

N.S. justice minister to review country's highest freedom of information fees

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Canadian Press: KEITH DOUCETTE

HALIFAX (CP) - At \$25, the fee Nova Scotia charges for an application under the province's Freedom of Information Act is the highest in Canada.

After years of deflecting opposition complaints about the Conservative government's "culture of secrecy," Justice Minister Murray Scott said Friday that a review was needed because he doesn't want the fee to be a barrier for those seeking government information.

"Something we don't want the province to be known for is having the highest (fee) in the country," Scott told reporters at the provincial legislature. "I know when you compare other fee structures in other provinces there are certainly many other provinces that are a lot lower than us."

Only Alberta charges the same rate.

Ontario, Prince Edward Island, New Brunswick and Newfoundland and Labrador charge \$5, while there is no charge for requests in Quebec.

Darce Fardy, head of the Right to Know Coalition of Nova Scotia, said he's convinced the \$25 fee acted as a deterrent to ordinary citizens seeking information.

Fardy, who retired last January as the province's freedom of information review officer, had long opposed the fee hike.

"I could see no reason for it," he said.

Figures supplied by the opposition Liberals show 1,037 requests were filed in 2002, the year the fee was raised. The number dipped to 761 by 2005.

The Liberals have introduced proposed amendments to the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act that would see the application fee reduced to \$5, and the names of applicants kept private.

Interim leader Michel Samson called the \$25 fee an "embarrassment" for Nova Scotia, and he said the amendments would help make the government more accountable.

"As a caucus with a limited budget, we are certainly very cognizant of the cost," he said.

Fardy said he supported both Liberal measures, especially the privacy provision.

"There's no reason why anyone should know who the applicant is . . . or what the applicant is asking because that shouldn't be part of the decision."

Nova Scotia was the first province to introduce freedom of information legislation in 1977.

When the ruling Conservatives increased the fee under former premier John Hamm, they said they wanted to reduce the number of frivolous requests and recoup the costs involved in collecting the information.

