

AMPS Budget Meeting Agenda Item Discourse Analysis

Introduction and Summary

This is a short preliminary summary of our analysis results investigating the Sault Ste. Marie council discussion for the December 2024 budget meeting agenda item to progress the approved speed enforcement technology. The work will be updated and revised as our research progresses.

The motion under debate in the budget meeting was:

“Resolved that the addition of automated monetary penalties (AMPS) supporting automated speed enforcement to the 2025 budget at a cost of \$0 be approved.”

Overview and Background

In April 2024, Sault Ste. Marie city council passed a motion to endorse staff to move forward with an automated speed enforcement (ASE) system. The most efficient method to implement the system is to use the administrative monetary penalty system (AMPS), a system that shifts speeding violations identified through the ASE technology away from the provincial offences court system, thereby freeing court resources for other offences. The AMPS would also create three new positions and help fund future road improvements for improved road user safety. The overall purpose of the ASE system is to eliminate speeding, unsafe driver behaviour and dangerous road users. The AMPS, in addition to administering the ASE system results and fines, is self-funded to provide a zero or net-positive financial result for the taxpayer/municipality, with any positive revenue directed towards funding proper road design (e.g. traffic calming) to eliminate speeding by default (passive enforcement). An ASE system using the AMPS is therefore intended to serve in this capacity as a temporary measure.

Many Ontario communities have already established an ASE system supported by the AMPS. This has enabled them to save police and court time and costs, reduce speeding and aggressive driving, increase road user safety and fund road design improvements serving to replace automated speed enforcement.

This analysis investigates the results of a council budget meeting discussion for a motion and vote to fund the AMPS at a zero levy cost for Sault Ste. Marie. The motivation for the investigation was that council had previously directed staff to proceed with the ASE funded by the AMPS, myriad benefits of the AMPS were identified, and no costs of the system or adverse impacts were identified, yet the vote was a slim margin against funding the AMPS for the endorsed ASE system.

System Description

An AMPS is a city-administered tribunal to adjudicate speeding violations independent of the traditional Provincial Offences Act court system, and has been identified as best practice for ASE systems. The AMPS consists of a Provincial Offences Officer to issue offence notices, administrative staff to input data, schedule hearings, and take payment, Screening Officers to review and determine whether to uphold, rescind, or modify the offence notice, and a third-party Hearing Officer to review and make a final decision on an offence notice if the Screening Officers' review is challenged.

An AMPS is dependent on a funding stream and offence notice volume, which the ASE provides. The AMPS is an effective revenue neutral or positive system operating in other municipalities across Ontario.

Research question

The research question that informs this analysis is: “Did the council discussion on the AMPS motion at the December 24, 2025 budget meeting materially meet the criteria of a conversation that would suitably inform a motion for the budget deliberation for an AMPS”?

The answer to this primary question is an indisputable “no”.

Our results led to the need for a followup research question to interpret exactly what was discussed at the council budget meeting during time allocated to discuss a motion about the AMPS funding for budget 2025, and why.

The secondary research question is: “What was the overall context of the AMPS budget motion conversation”?

For this answer, it was very clearly the ASE. In other words, the council conversation from the start of the conversation to the end, was almost exclusively centred on the ASE, a debate previously discussed and voted on at council in April 2025.

Method

The analysis used a mixed method: a quantitative assessment of the discussion terms, along with a critical discourse analysis (CDA) and the application of artificial intelligence (LLM) to backstop that analysis without the insight of the AMPS motion (i.e. the neutral application of AI).

Critical discourse analysis is a qualitative research method used to study language within its social context and meaning. Discourse analysis focuses on the social aspects of a conversation and the ways language is used to achieve specific goals such as build trust, create doubt, evoke emotions, manipulate conversations, build alliances, create divisions or spread misinformation and disinformation. Discourse analysis can consider a conversation (written text or verbal language) by considering the grammar, genre, vocabulary, structure of the conversation or interactions. By interpreting the discourse based on both the details of the material itself and on contextual knowledge, discourse analysis allows for a rich interpretation of what was discussed.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) using Large Language Models (LLMs) are constructed on normalised speech to define and predict language, syntax, lexical and discourse in natural human language. While criticisms have been levelled at AI specifically due to their advantage to maintain and forecast existing discourse patterns, that very same shortcoming serves as an important benefit as the basis for valuable discourse analysis research – backcasting verses forecasting. While many critiques exist of LLM algorithms, those critiques are especially valuable in analysing human speech and language precisely because many of the algorithms are intended to reconstruct, reproduce and reinforce, or predict, the status quo of natural language. Our research applied AI to backcast a discussion, which allowed our analysis to benefit from an impartial analysis of the CDA results.

The quantitative analysis used a selection of seven terms or phrases that would have been expected to arise during a discussion about the AMPS to implement the council-endorsed ASE system. These seven terms or phrases are listed with the results in Table 1.

Summary of Results

The council discourse reflects tensions between financial pragmatism, public safety, and ideological stances on urban governance and enforcement, specifically and unquestionably around the automated speed enforcement system (ASE) rather than the AMPS motion. This is important for two reasons: 1) the discussion was clearly not a discussion about the AMPS motion at hand, which evidently generated confusion among members of council; and 2) the discussion reveals tensions between public safety with neoliberal and authoritarian ideologies foregrounded by disinformation and false narratives around the council-endorsed ASE system.

The result appears to have undermined democratic principles and processes through the use of misinformation/disinformation, right-leaning populist ideologies and an attack on science, facts and evidence through dogma and unsubstantiated and largely incorrect claims made by the Mayor and one member of council. Tables 2 a – c list a few anticipated outcomes contributed by these results of the discussion.

Critical Discourse Analysis Summary

The text reveals three major discourse strands that structure how ASE (not the AMPS) is discussed:

1. Fiscal and Managerial Rationality

- **Revenue implications** dominate the debate. Supporters frame ASE as revenue-neutral or potentially revenue-generating, with funds suggested to be reinvested in road safety and environmental design. Opponents argue that costs (staffing, equipment, administration, legal processes) may outweigh revenues due to traffic diversion. In other words, revenue implications should have been about the AMPS (the motion) identified as “zero levy impact” meaning either revenue neutral or positive, but instead was around the ASE system function, already endorsed by council.
- **Budget framing** positions the ASE as costing “zero” in the budget due to anticipated fine revenues, but critics destabilize this logic by questioning “future levy impacts.” This shows a clash between *facts, evidence and experiences with speculative populism and unsubstantiated and groundless beliefs*. Furthermore, the budgetary framing centres the conversation around fiscal management versus safety—a neoliberal austerity framing—of the ASE, despite the conversation being for a motion about the AMPS, and not the overall ASE system, which has already been selected as the most efficient system to implement the ASE and already been endorsed by council. **This framing allowed for the bizarre discussion around austerity for a budget agenda item with a zero levy impact to emerge.** In other words, budget framing should have been about the AMPS (the motion), but instead was almost exclusively around the ASE system, already endorsed by council.
- Note that this discourse strand did not include any substantive discussion about the motion (AMPS), instead focusing on the ASE system which resulted in many fiscal and managerial benefits of the AMPS being disregarded or cast into doubt through the use of disinformation, distraction and deception.

2. Safety and Public Good

- Supporters consistently frame ASE as a child and community safety measure. This is a moralizing and health discourse: slowing traffic near schools, hospitals, and senior homes is presented as an ethical responsibility of council, and has been upheld as the goal of ASE systems through concept and legislation. Supporters invoke comparative authority (“Toronto, Ottawa, Sudbury already use ASE”) to normalize ASE system legitimacy.
- However, the ASE system is a safety system, not the AMPS (an administrative process to implement the ASE), suggesting those members of council believed they were discussing the

ASE, not the AMPS.

- Opponents counter with anecdotal and hypothetical belief-based safety discourses. A police-background councillor stressed that discretion, context-sensitive enforcement, and emergency responses cannot be replaced by machines. Here, “human judgment” becomes a discursive tool delegitimizing automation.
- Despite this position, no mention of how the AMPS manages such discretion was raised, the judgment discourse in the context of the AMPS went unchallenged among other members of council as did an argument for the roles of human judgment in the AMPS, suggesting here that these opponents believed they were discussing the ASE, not the AMPS. There was no comparison or contrast; only a single-sided belief-based rhetoric on something irrelevant to the discussion and motion (an effective form of distraction and diversion).
- Furthermore, and astonishingly for a revenue neutral-positive AMPS motion during an austerity-driven budget item discussion, the cost of policing speeding versus substantial fiscal benefits of the AMPS supported ASE system was never presented as a counter challenge to the anecdotal belief-based human judgment policing safety argument, or used to counter the policing position, despite the police submitting a letter in support of the ASE system supported by the AMPS.
- This approach suggests a deliberate effort to distract and deceive members of council and the public using disinformation, distraction and deception.
- These results further suggest a failure of meeting coherence and chair to adequately re-centre the conversation. This may be interpreted as a *Procedural By-law* irregularity insofar as it contributes to the manipulation of council members into believing the discussion was about the ASE and not the AMPS (“if we're going to re-vote this issue”).
- Note that this discourse strand further did not include any substantive discussion about the motion (AMPS), instead focusing on the ASE system which resulted in many safety and public good benefits of the AMPS being disregarded or cast into doubt through the use of disinformation, distraction and deception.

3. Governance, Technology, and Control

- The debate reflects tensions between automation and human agency. Proponents frame ASE as a rational, scalable tool to address safety without further stressing police resources. Opponents frame ASE as mechanistic, inflexible, and ultimately ineffective due to *driver behavior adaptation* (diversion, avoidance, technological counter-surveillance warnings).
- Once again, this is only possible by both positions centring on the ASE system, and not the AMPS to implement the ASE.
- **Urban design discourse** acts as a middle ground. Several councillors argue ASE should be a “stop-gap” while working toward *environmental design solutions* (traffic calming infrastructure for example). This produces a layered governance logic: long-term (urban redesign), medium- and short-term (ASE).
- Conversely, while the Mayor also argues for environmental design long-term, he stops short of providing any short- to medium-term solution including that of ASE. In doing so, he enabled a discourse of distraction and disinformation to prevail by centring on the ASE and disregarding the beneficial role of the AMPS in those short-, medium- and long-term goals.

- Further, while the environmental design solution long-term strongly supports other mechanisms such as ASE short-term, the Mayor completely disregards the value of the AMPS for that long-term solution funding mechanism, enabling that same “cash-grab” (populist) rhetoric we are now experiencing at the provincial level. In addition, by centring on the ASE and not the AMPS, he ignores both direct funding for those design changes as other communities are realising, while also ignoring indirect behaviour changes across the entire community for the re-normalisation of safer driver behaviour.
- Incredibly, both the Mayor and Councillor Spina invoke behaviour change (driver diversion – unsubstantiated and hypothetical) and disregard behaviour change (slower driver speeds – empirically evident and factual) in the same breath through their distraction tactics, and this was never challenged or corrected in opposition arguments. They are able to disregard these benefits of the AMPS by centring their comments on the ASE where false generalisations (populist rhetoric) and misinformation can be wielded and weaponised, rather than the AMPS motion. In effect, they shape the space to ignore—through distraction, deception and disinformation—an important characteristic of the AMPS specifically to argue against the ASE during a motion for an AMPS. Had they focused their comments on the AMPS rather than the ASE system, they would not have withheld these crucial insights, and would have made a strong case in favour of the motion, which the record shows both voted against the motion, confirming their comments were not in line with the motion but rather the ASE.
- While these governance, technology and control matters are important conversations, nonetheless, this would not be the place for them beyond the context of the AMPS. However, they were clearly made in reference to the ASE.
- Note that this discourse strand overall did not include any substantive discussion about the motion (AMPS), instead it focused on the ASE system which resulted in the superior governance, technology and control benefits of the AMPS being disregarded or cast into doubt through the use of disinformation, distraction and deception..

Discursive Power Relations

- The Mayor’s skepticism frames ASE (not AMPS) as ineffective and costly, but is challenged by councillors and staff evidence and facts invoking community complaints and committee research, comparator results and the conservative nature of revenue estimates, suggesting an intra-council power struggle.
- The **vote shift dynamics**—with ties, absences, and re-votes—illustrate how policy outcomes hinge not only on discursive legitimacy but also on procedural timing, by-laws and presence, opening space for concern and discussion over democratic processes.

Summary of Quantitative Results

The quantitative criteria considered are listed in Table 1 below along with the results:

Number of...	Mentions
direct mentions of ASE	23.5
indirect mentions of ASE	1
direct mentions of AMPS	1 (reading of motion - \$0 levy cost)

indirect mentions of AMPS	1.5
mentions of benefits of AMPS	1
mentions of costs of AMPS	0
questions to staff about AMPS	0

Table 1: Summary of quantitative results

The half values (0.5) were in direct response to the Mayor's comments—we argue [elsewhere](#) that his comments were specific to the ASE system, however, for the overall assessment here we provide benefit of the doubt by erring on the side of caution and therefore balanced the values in our quantitative assessment equally between the ASE and AMPS.

The last metric (“Number of questions for staff about the AMPS”) is important because it demonstrates council members' interest in, focus on and concerns about the AMPS. The results clearly demonstrate that council members had no questions about the benefits or costs of the AMPS (when implemented), or why staff had recommended the AMPS, and therefore no concerns or identified possible concerns. One potential mention of this measure was in relation to possible future changes to the ASE system, thus was excluded from this metric but included in the second metric (indirect mentions of ASE). This would reinforce the overall discussion of raising no disadvantages or costs, or benefits and advantages, of the system through mentions of the AMPS during council discussion.

The expected result of our quantitative criteria for the AMPS discussion would be a high number of the last five criteria, and low, or supporting, references to the first two criteria. What the results show is the exact converse. There were actually only 2.5 mentions (one mention in the motion (mentioned AMPS with one direct benefit (zero levy cost)), the Mayor's indeterminate claim (indirect), and one from counsellor Caputo (indirect benefit)) of the last five criteria in the table above, and an exceedingly high number of mentions (23.5) for the first two criteria, signalling that the AMPS motion discussion did not in fact discuss the AMPS motion in front of council. It strayed off course and the chair failed to refocus the conversation. Note that indirect mentions include inferences and a direct sub-mention related to the text. Our critical discourse analysis confirms these results, and the AI analysis further confirms the overall results.

Discussion

Our analysis shows that the discussion was materially about the ASE (23.5 direct/indirect mentions)

and not around the AMPS (2.5 mentions including one in the motion itself). We wonder why the chair did not re-focus the discussion and, indeed, led the discussion in a manner that appeared to focus on the ASE.

We also found the vote was cancelled and retaken when one member of council stepped out of council chambers prior to the vote (“We’ll cancel that vote and wait for member of council to return”). That appears to be an irregularity of the municipal *Procedural By-law*.

We also found that members of council were under the assumption that the ASE motion from April 2024 was being “re-voted” (If we’re going to re-vote on the matter...) which also appears to be an irregularity of the municipal *Procedural By-law* and perhaps even the manipulation (whether deliberate or unintentional) of council members during the council discussion prior to the December motion vote, thereby raising questions around the Code of Conduct for Municipal Members of Council.

For these reasons, we also investigated the two dissenter comments: the [Mayor](#) and one [member](#) of council, and provide an initial summary of those analyses as linked.

Comments by both the Mayor and one member of council—by repeating disinformation and countering staff, the staff report, facts and evidence, the results of the April 2024 vote that endorsed the ASE, and staff responses during the December budget meeting—appeared to be acting in a manner that was divisive and polarising for both council and citizens.

Their extensive use of disinformation and distraction introduced both confusion for the public (why is the city discussing ASE when it is supposed to be discussing the AMPS; is the ASE as good as council stated; does ASE work; does the public support ASE; etc), and clearly for members of council, three of whom cast their votes in an inexplicably contradictory manner (2 in favour of ASE in April 2024 but opposed to the AMPS in December 2024; one opposed to the ASE in April 2024 but in favour of the AMPS in December 2024).

These comments undermined the legitimacy of municipal authority, law enforcement, the Highway Traffic Act (HTA), and the justice system, and included several specific references to methods drivers could use to violate the HTA, and avoid ASE tickets, ultimately undermining municipal authority, the rule of law and democracy.

By doing so and focusing on fiscal austerity, neoliberalist arguments, individualism and anti-authority, these two members of council also contributed to empowering, enabling and licencing right-wing radicalism by, for instance, legitimising speeding while demonstrating a populist approach through disinformation, distraction and deception.

While advancing populist views based on political rhetoric and neoliberal dogma, this council discussion also perpetuated a structurally inequitable use of public spaces and a structurally inequitable access/mobility system, favouring motorised mobility over active transportation and promoting excessive entitlement for a social privilege (driving). Such inequalities have been shown to undermine liberal democracy and contribute to populist views. This municipal pattern may represent a threat multiplier, perpetuating and further fuelling the extremist views (in this case right-leaning centred on the individual) developing both in the community and province.

Why should this concern me?

What happened at the December 2024 council meeting should concern all citizens as this analysis suggests the meeting conversation for the AMPS motion may have:

Potential community effect	Example
Undermined democratic processes	Re-vote of ASE motion (incorrect assumption) and re-vote during AMPS motion, both representing potential <i>Procedural By-law</i> irregularities
Cast doubt on the use and value of science, facts and evidence	Repetition of misinformation: drivers will divert route in substantial number to reduce anticipated revenue stream
Constructed and conveyed a false narrative and cast doubt to members of council and the public about the motion and ASE system	ASE will not produce revenue anticipated during AMPS motion discussion
Subverted rationality and critical thought	Extensive use of disinformation to counter staff report, evidence, experience and scientific studies of ASE: police less costly and more effective catching speeders than ASE long-term environmental design negates need for medium- and short-term solutions for road user safety
Produced distrust of process; potential citizen and council manipulation	Re-votes, possible <i>Procedural By-law</i> and Code of Conduct for Members of Council irregularities; widespread use of disinformation, distraction and deception
Diminished municipal council legitimacy (especially for protecting the public safety in public spaces) and sabotaged (municipal) authority under liberal democratic processes	Undermined municipal authority and traffic enforcement with specific techniques to avoid speeding infractions, narrative and authority of advocacy

Table 2a: potential concerns from December 2024 AMPS motion discussion

The meeting discussion and vote for the AMPS may have:

Potential community effect	Example
Compromised road user safety	Delay of identified safety measure; false narrative setting among council, staff and public
Questioned and gaslit road user and citizen concerns about safety, while generating safety fatigue	Disregarded current community concerns around road user safety; ignored short- and medium-term intervention benefits of AMPS and ASE
Expanded mobility network inequity	Increased psychological sense entitlement of drivers; unjustifiably delayed identified and endorsed urgent safety measures; failed to discourage, or even justified and contributed to, an excessive speed normalisation/culture

Table 2b: potential road user safety effects from December 2024 AMPS motion discussion

The council discussion also may have generated an adverse impact on our community wellbeing and democratic principles by*:

Potential community effect	Example
Advancing populist approaches in council and at the city	Use of disinformation to present false arguments; disregard for mitigating and counter factors by focusing on ASE rather than AMPS
Promoting right-wing extremism	Expanding inequality of local mobility network; reducing access and safety for vulnerable road users
Sabotaging liberal democratic institutions	Undermining municipal authority, law enforcement, legislative coherence
Endorsing neoliberalist ideals, austerity and fiscal conservatism that undermines social wellbeing	Focusing debate on ASE revenue instead of road user safety or AMPS matters; advocating for increased policing costs; disregarding fiscal efficiency of AMPS
Defending and proselytizing dogma	Repeated and unsubstantiated assertions of opinion that countered evidence and facts
Spreading disinformation and misinformation	Use of opinion as authoritative to mislead council members and public
Exhibiting manipulation of democratic principles and processes	Confusion among members of council and citizens around ASE and around motion
Communicating to cast confusion and doubt	Unsubstantiated assertions that drivers will divert; revenue stream may be inadequate
Sanctioning, advocating for, or even counselling to commit offences under the HTA	Evading enforcement by use of technologies, speeding, engaging in distracted driving, etc.

*see our analysis of the Mayor's and one member of council's speeches for details

Table 2c: potential community wellbeing effects from December 2024 AMPS motion discussion

Conclusion

The AMPS motion discussion during the Sault Ste. Marie budget meeting of December 2024 exhibited a variety of tactics used by powerful interests across liberal democratic countries to shape narratives

and manipulate individuals and groups, including the public, in a manner that harms society and community wellbeing, expands (social, health and economic) inequity and generates inequalities of access, emboldens extremism, generates social polarisation, and perpetuates populist politics through the use of disinformation, distraction and deception.

Future work will investigate whether this was deliberate or merely the coincidental result of ideological misalignment with, and emotional and ideological resistance to/support for, a prior council decision.

Our investigation demonstrates how the December 2024 council discussion and vote was characterised by fiscal recklessness, neglect to attend to identified safety risks for citizens in a timely manner, failure to consider additional citizen, taxpayer, road user and emergency services costs were the AMPS motion defeated, the use of misinformation and disinformation, and threats to democratic processes.

Finally, we note that these tactics are playing out at the provincial level on the very same issue (ASE) with equally concerning results. Despite the, provincially, much stronger, better coordinated and more present/visible response to ASE disinformation with facts and evidence, the manipulative and deceptive approaches we have identified locally, whether deliberate or unintentional, remain powerful forces contributing to ongoing road user safety concerns, populist rhetoric, and threats to our democracy. We therefore provide our preliminary summary of initial results to support organisations and individuals working for greater equity and road user safety actions in municipalities across the province.