

Haldimand County 2024-25 Ward Boundary Review Backgrounder

Discussion Paper B: What is the Optimal Size for a Municipal Council?

Context

Despite the long history of municipal institutions in Ontario, the premises and practices used for determining the overall composition of councils has never been satisfactorily or definitively addressed, either in legislation or regulation. There are no clear principles at play, no “standards,” and no formulas to apply. Each municipality has its own history, its own traditions, and its own attributes. Furthermore, there is no established timetable to require that municipal councils review the continuing validity of the number of places at the council table.

The *Municipal Act, 2001* establishes the minimum size for the council of a local municipality in Ontario as five, “one of whom shall be the head of council” who must be elected by general vote (subsections 217 (1) 1 and (1) 3). There are no references to a maximum or to an “appropriate” size associated with, for example, the population of the municipality. This absence contrasts with the provisions of regulations issued under the *Education Act* (Ontario Regulation 412/00) which include a detailed formula to determine both the number of trustees and their distribution across each school board’s area of jurisdiction before each regular municipal election.

As a result, the composition of local councils in Ontario varies widely. Haldimand County’s Council is composed of seven members, two above the minimum size. When compared to other municipalities in Ontario, the Council is the same size as those elected in a number of bigger municipalities like Aurora, Pickering, and Burlington but is smaller than councils elected in some rural or smaller population municipalities like Gravenhurst, North Perth, and Muskoka Lakes. See Figure Bi to compare Haldimand County’s council composition to selected single-tier municipalities in Ontario or others in the same population range.

The present seven-member Haldimand County Council is what might be called the default format; that is, it is the composition that has been in place since 2001. It is the status quo. Endorsing the continuation of a seven-member council, however, should be seen as an option available to the County, just as much as would be a decision to elect a council of a different size.



Figure Bi
Population and Council Members, Comparable Ontario Municipalities

Municipality	2021 Population	Area (sq.km)	Council Members	Average Population per Member
Norfolk County	67,490	1,597.68	9	7,499
Welland*	55,750	81.16	15	3,717
Belleville	55,071	247.15	9	6,119
North Bay	52,662	315.53	11	4,787
Haldimand County	49,216	1,270.34	7	7,031
Cornwall	47,845	61.50	11	4,350
Woodstock*	46,705	56.46	7	6,672
St. Thomas**	42,840	35.61	9	4,760
Brant County	39,474	817.66	11	3,589
Average	50,784	498	10	5,391

* Lower tier; all others single tier.

** St. Thomas councillors are elected at-large, all others in wards.

The legislative authority to determine the number of councillors (*Municipal Act, 2001* section 217) rests with the municipal council and is distinct from the determination of the method by which they are to be elected (section 222). A fundamental question for an electoral review in Haldimand County must be whether a council of seven members is appropriate to govern a municipality that is now home to just over 50,000 people (2024 estimate population of 52,600) but is expected to grow to over 60,400 by 2031.

The optimal size of a municipal council depends on the purpose and role council is expected to play as a decision-making and representative body. Three interconnected factors could be considered: the capacity of council to provide effective political management, responsiveness, and accountability.

Effective Political Management: A certain number of elected representatives are required to carry out the essential governmental functions of a municipality, but the workload undertaken by representatives varies with each individual councillor. In part, it will be driven by the personal preferences and commitment of individual councillors with a large element the result of the range of responsibilities that the municipality undertakes and the way it conducts its business. The amount of time spent on council



business is not easily quantified, but serving on council is not a “9-to-5” job. How much material must councillors review and understand before participating effectively in council decision-making? How much constituency casework is directed to councillors? What committees, agencies, or other bodies do councillors participate in or chair? The size of the council has an impact on the amount of time individual councillors can allocate to such formal duties and to casework, as well as to their personal, family, and non-political obligations.

Responsiveness: The heart of “effective representation” (to be discussed more fully in relation to the guiding principles for a ward system – see Discussion Paper D) is the conviction that councillors must be able to maintain contact with constituents, primarily thought of as those who reside in the electoral district where the councillor is elected. The basic question in this context is whether the present council composition has an impact on the capacity of councillors to act as an intermediary between residents and the municipality.^[1]

Logically, the larger the council, the more likely such connections can be maintained, since residents have more councillors to contact and there are more councillors to gather information across the relatively large geographic area of Haldimand County. Conversely, the smaller the council, the greater the challenge to deliver such representation successfully. Although councillors are elected to serve the entire municipality – as reflected in the oath of office they take – at election time, councillors are associated with only a part of the municipality and their electoral success may hinge on how well they are thought to have been “responsive” to that part of the municipality.

Accountability: Municipal councillors are not only “political managers” of the municipal corporation but are accountable for their decisions through an election. A democratic electoral system should provide voters with an adequate range of opportunities to select municipal legislators. If, as the adage has it, municipal government is “closest to the people,” the number of representatives subject to public accountability for their actions is a key indicator of how close or remote the council is to the community.

Preliminary Insights into the Composition of Haldimand County’s Council

Considering these three perspectives will provide insights for considering the optimal size of the municipal Council in Haldimand County. The most basic question to ask at the outset is, “is seven the right number?”

[1] **Note:** this is not a comment on the performance of incumbent councillors, but rather a question about the reasonable expectations associated with being an elected (part-time) representative in the present configuration.



The Consultant Team's working assumption is that seven members is the preferred size for Haldimand County's municipal Council. Through the various evaluative exercises that will be undertaken as part of the Ward Boundary Review, the Consultant Team may identify how alternative council compositions would align with the objectives of the review. An example of where composition may become a consideration is when the Consultant Team develops options for alternative ward boundaries.

A decision to change the size of council would need to be followed by an assessment of the way Council operates as a decision-making body. This topic, however, is not within the scope of the Ward Boundary Review.

Topical Discussion Papers A to E

Discussion Papers will be available to residents, each addressing one of the topics to be considered in this review:

- Discussion Paper A – The Haldimand County Electoral System
- Discussion Paper B – What is the Optimal Size for a Municipal Council?
- Discussion Paper C – The Method of Election
- Discussion Paper D – Guiding Principles to Design Wards
- Discussion Paper E – Why a Ward Boundary Review?