

# 2023 Council Composition & Ward Boundary Review Municipality of North Perth

## Discussion Paper B: What is the Optimal Size for North Perth's Municipal Council?

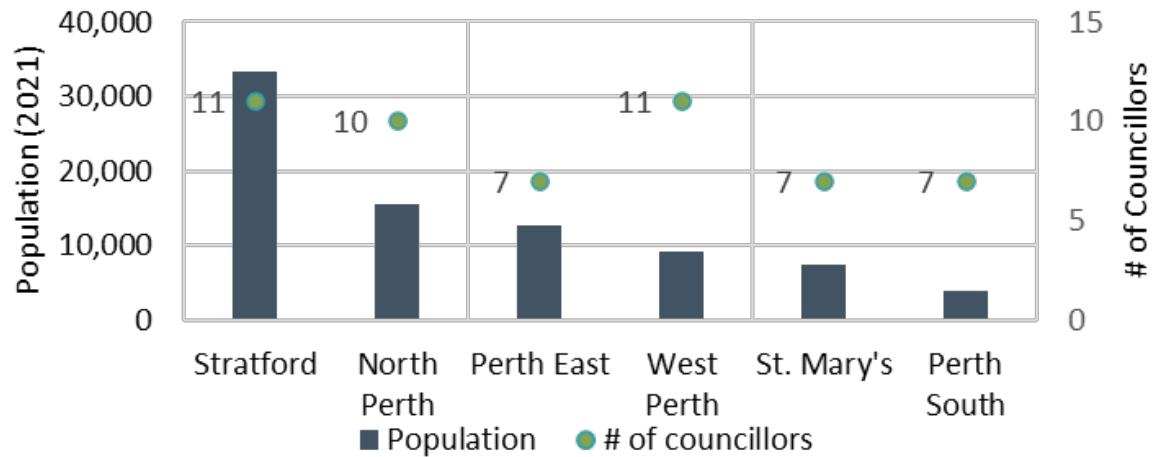
Despite the long history of municipal institutions in Ontario, the premises and practices used for determining the overall composition of councils has never been satisfactorily or definitively addressed, either in legislation or regulation. There are no clear principles at play, no “standards” and no 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 (s. 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* (O. Reg. 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. North Perth Council is composed of ten members, five above the minimum size. When compared to other municipalities in Ontario, North Perth's Council is bigger than those elected in a number of larger municipalities like Whitby, Aurora, Whitchurch-Stouffville, Orangeville, Waterloo and Burlington and is also bigger than councils elected in some rural or smaller population municipalities like South Huron, Meaford, Guelph/Eramosa Township and Clearview. Figure A compares Perth County council size while Figure B compares North Perth's council composition to other municipalities in Perth County and selected municipalities in Ontario.



Figure A – Number of Councillors and Population by Municipalities within Perth County



The present ten-member Council is what might be called the default format; that is, it is the composition that has been in place since the municipality was created. It is the status quo. However, endorsing the continuation of a ten-member council should be seen as an option available to the Municipality, just as much as would be a decision to elect a Council of a different size. The status quo therefore requires a rationale rather than simply being accepted because it is familiar, “the way we have always done it.”

The legislative authority to determine the number of Councillors (*Municipal Act, 2001 s. 217*) rests with the municipal council and is distinct from the determination of the method by which they are to be elected. A fundamental question for an electoral review in North Perth must be whether a council of ten members is appropriate to govern a municipality that is now home to 15,500 people and is expected to grow continue to grow, anticipating over 6,000 new persons over the next decade.<sup>1</sup>

The optimal size of a municipal council for North Perth depends today 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

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<sup>1</sup> Population and housing projections prepared by Watson & Associates Economists Ltd. 2023 Perth County Official Plan Review - DRAFT.



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. 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 Paper F) 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.<sup>1</sup>

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 North Perth. 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. In North Perth this general relationship is complicated by the fact that, while there are eight Councillors, there are only three wards, so that each Councillor represents one of three parts - not one of eight parts - of the Municipality. In this respect, the combination of a large number of Councillors with a small number of wards may complicate the achievement of responsiveness in North Perth.

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<sup>1</sup> 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.



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.

Combining these three perspectives will provide a possible formula for determining the optimal size of the municipal council in North Perth.

### **Preliminary Insights into the Composition of North Perth’s Council**

In Discussion Paper C, four components of the present council structure are described: the Mayor, the Deputy Mayor, the County Councillor and the ward Councillors, adding up to a ten-member Council. The most basic question to ask at the outset is “why ten?”

In comparison to many similar Ontario municipalities, it seems like a large number so this became one of the topics in our interviews with members of Council.

Most members supported retaining a Council of this size, concentrating on two implications:<sup>1</sup>

- a) a better distribution of workload
  - There is a lot of work (I sit on 3 committees and a couple of task forces) but “Many hands make light work.”
  - The present council is large, but it distributes the workload to make it appropriate for a volunteer gig. You can combine it with a full-time job.
  - Do we need a ten-member council? Yes – it does not cost much and it relates to workload. A portion of the job is volunteer, so it keeps people connected. It is a decent part-time, flexible job even for the Mayor and Deputy Mayor.
  - It would make sense to reduce the size of council from the big-picture side, but we need to be realistic. We don’t pay councillors well, so fewer would mean an increased workload – is that a good trade-off? Reducing the size of Council would increase the workload of Councillors. Not all Councillors are available all

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<sup>1</sup> Please note that the comments included here and in the next paragraph are not direct quotes but are paraphrases drawn from interview notes.



the time – I sit on 2 regular committees and an ad hoc committee - but I am self-employed.



b) enhanced representation

- There is more room for discussion and varying opinions with a council of this size. The present arrangement allows for a good deliberation and reaching a decision.
- We are growing so there is no reason to reduce the council. Back then [at amalgamation] it may have been overkill but not now.
- It is easier to commit with this many councillors, even if the workload would be greater with a smaller number.
- The municipality is a large geographic area, so knowledge gathering is more successful with ten members.

Those who supported the consideration of a reduction in size in this review primarily approached the idea with an eye on the decision-making role of Council:

- The present council is too big. It is hard to get agreement on contentious issues. I would support something between a 5 and 10 -member council. An ideal size would be 7, perhaps reduce by one councillor per ward.
- The ten-member council works well at times but there is a lot of overlap (for example on budget envisioning).
- Work on the committee side could be better distributed but if the number is reduced what about the committee work?
- There should be options to take the number down: we could do it with five. It would cost less but would mean a different role for Councillors and would mean less diversity on Council.
- I could see a six-member council with two rural and two urban wards (and an increase in pay – presently around \$16,000)

The Consultant Team's working assumption is that ten (and no more) is the preferred number but that a case can be made for a reduction, perhaps as part of a reconsideration of the way Council conducts its business, for example by modifying the number of committees and other bodies that members of Council now serve on. Such topics themselves are, however, not within the professional expertise of the Consultant Team so will not be addressed in this review but may be considered in a Council debate and decision.



A determination to reduce the size of Council would need to be followed by an assessment of the way Council operates as a decision-making body, a topic that may be justified in 2023 whether Council size changes or not.

Figure B below outlines the number and composition of other relatable municipalities across Ontario.

Figure B Composition of Councils, Selected Ontario Municipalities

Municipality	2021 Population	Council Composition Total	Council Composition Mayor PLUS	Method of Election Councillors
Township of Perth East	12,595	7	Deputy Mayor At-large 5 Councillors	5 Wards 1 Councillor per ward
Municipality of North Perth	15,538	10	Deputy Mayor At-large 8 Councillors	3 Wards 2 wards 3 councillors 1 ward 2 councillors
Township of Perth South	3,776	7	6 Councillors At-large Deputy Mayor = highest placing Councillor candidate	At-large
Municipality of West Perth	9,038	11	Deputy Mayor At-large 4 Councillors	4 Wards 3 wards 2 councillors 1 ward 3 councillors
City of Stratford	33,232	11	10 Councillors At-large (including Deputy Mayor elected by Council)	At-large
Town of St. Marys	7,386	7	6 Councillors At-large (including Deputy Mayor elected by Council)	At-large
Town of New Tecumseth	43,948	10	Deputy Mayor At-large 8 Councillors	8 Wards 1 Councillor per ward



Town of Whitby	138,501	9	4 Regional Councillors 4 Town Councillors	4 Wards 1 Regional and 1 Town Councillor per ward
Township of Clearview	14,814	9	Deputy Mayor At-large 7 Councillors (in 2022, 5 Councillors)	7 Wards 1 Councillor per ward (in 2022, 5 Wards, 1 Councillor per ward)
City of Waterloo	121,436	8	7 Councillors	7 wards 1 Councillor per ward
City of Burlington	186,948	7	6 Councillors	6 wards 1 Councillor per ward
Town of Aurora	62,057	7	6 Councillors At-large	At-large (in 2022, 6 wards, 1 Councillor per ward)
Town of Whitchurch-Stouffville	49,864	7	6 Councillors	6 wards 1 Councillor per ward
Town of Orangeville	30,167	7	Deputy Mayor At-large 5 Councillors	At-large
Municipality of Meaford	11,485	7	Deputy Mayor At-large 5 Councillors	At-large
Municipality of South Huron	10,063	7	Deputy Mayor At-large 3 Councillors	3 wards 3 wards 2 councillors 1 ward 1 councillor
Township of Guelph/ Eramosa	13,904	5	4 Councillors (plus a County Councillor who does not sit on the Township Council)	4 wards 1 Councillor per ward (+ 1 County Councillor elected At-large)