

2023 Council Composition & Ward Boundary Review Municipality of North Perth

Discussion Paper E: Ward Magnitudes in North Perth

As noted in Discussion Paper A, the Municipality of North Perth and three other new municipalities were created in Perth County in 1998 out of fourteen existing municipalities. This arrangement was the result of decisions made by the provincial government of the day to decrease the number of municipalities and municipal elected officials across Ontario. The Ministerial Restructuring Order of June 26, 1997, established that in all four cases the councils of the new municipalities in Perth County would be elected in wards that were defined by the pre-amalgamation municipal boundaries of their component parts.

In 2017, the Council of the smallest of the new municipalities, Perth South, exercised its authority under section 217 of the Municipal Act 2001 to dissolve the two wards based on the former townships of Blanshard and Downie and to implement a general vote system to elect six Councillors. The other three Perth County municipalities have so far retained wards, but the same choice is open to them.

In two cases - Perth East and Perth South (until the 2018 municipal election) - the wards would be symmetrical; that is, each ward would elect the same number of Councillors. In the other two municipalities, representation would be asymmetrical; that is, the number of seats allocated to the wards varied. This model of representation is a way to elect a municipal council where the population is not distributed uniformly across the new municipality without having to draw or re-draw ward boundaries – a potentially more convenient and politically palatable arrangement than designing an original and symmetrical representative system as part of the restructuring exercise.

Such an arrangement may be referred to as “proportional equality”: for example, if an area has twice the population of another it would be expected to have twice as many seats or an area with a third more population than another might have three seats while the other has two.

This is the system in place in North Perth where today the Listowel and Elma Wards each elect three Councillors but Wallace Ward elects two¹. The basic arrangement was

¹ As noted in Discussion Paper C, the present distribution was established by North Perth Council soon after amalgamation.



an integral part of the Ministerial Restructuring Order and can be considered a “founding compromise” that ensured a proportionate share of Council seats for each of the three pre-amalgamation municipalities and guaranteed rural representation on council, presumably in order to make amalgamation more acceptable. In our professional assessment, this should not necessarily be considered a permanent principle in the face of ongoing changes in population numbers and the character of the population of North Perth, although the nature of the municipality unquestionably requires protecting a rural voice on council.

Leaving aside for the moment whether the present 3:2 distribution is still valid after more than twenty years, the existing arrangement should be subject to careful consideration since there are other models of representation, primarily involving a symmetrical allocation of seats that could elect one or more councillors per ward. One of the questions that needs to be asked about the present arrangement is whether it is fair that some residents of North Perth have three votes to cast for ward councillors while others have only two.

However, if there is support for a symmetrical allocation of seats that can provide better population parity, it is unlikely that revised wards can be drawn using the boundaries of the three pre-amalgamation municipalities, as has been the case for the last twenty-five years or so.

Preliminary Observations on Ward Magnitudes in North Perth

As has already been noted, it appears that the goal of population parity² among the wards was not a premise of the ward system in what we called the “founding compromise.” Rather, the wards deliberately adhered to the historic boundaries of the three pre-amalgamation municipalities and nine council seats in the new municipality were allocated on the basis of what we earlier called “proportional equality.” The distribution of seats in the Restructuring Order was 4 for Listowel, 3 for Elma and 2 for Wallace which was actually very close to proportional equality as shown in Figure 1. That is, if each of the Councillors elected in the smallest ward is considered to represent 1.0 residents, each Councillor in the other two wards would represent approximately 1.10 residents.

² The principle of population parity will be discussed in detail in Discussion Paper F.



Figure 1 – Comparative Population by Ward 1996

Pre-Amalgamation Municipality	Population 1996	Seats on North Perth Council		Population per Councillor	Ratio
		Formula	Actual		
Elma	3,978	3	3.34	1,326	1.11
Listowel	5,262	4	4.42	1,315	1.10
Wallace	2,382	2	2.00	1,191	1.00
Total	11,622	9		1,291	

After a single election, however, the composition of Council was altered by making the position of Deputy Mayor a separate office and by reducing the number of seats in the Listowel ward from 4 to 3, giving the residents of that ward the same Council representation as Elma³. In terms of the ratio each councillor in Listowel would represent 1.47 people for every 1 person represented by the Wallace Councillors. See Figure 2⁴ and Figure 3 for the distribution in 2021.

Figure 2 – Comparative Population by Ward 1999

Pre-Amalgamation Municipality	Population 1996	Seats on North Perth Council		Population per Councillor	Ratio
		Formula	Actual		
Elma	3,978	3	3.34	1,326	1.11
Listowel	5,262	3	4.42	1,754	1.47
Wallace	2,382	2	2.00	1,191	1.00
Total	11,622	8		1,453	

³ The trade-off appears to be the expectation that Listowel would have considerable influence over the choice of Deputy Mayor in the general vote system. See Discussion Paper C.

⁴ The population figures used in Figure 2 are the same as in Figure 1



By the time of this review, the population growth in Listowel ward⁵ has resulted in a significant departure from “proportionate representation” so that, in fact, Listowel is under-represented on North Perth Council as shown in Figure 3 below.

Figure 3 – Comparative Population by Ward 2021

Pre-Amalgamation Municipality	Population 2021	Seats on North Perth Council		Population per Councillor	Ratio
		Formula	Actual		
Elma	3,940	3	3.34	1,313	1.22
Listowel	9,460	3	4.42	3,153	2.93
Wallace	2,150	2	2.00	1,075	1.00
Total	15,550	8		1,944	

This assessment confirms that not only do the three present wards in North Perth fail to meet the representation by population principle, they also do not succeed in providing the proportional equality of the “founding compromise” on which they were created.

Are there options to address this inequity? The Consultant Team is prepared to consider and recommend to North Perth other models of representation, primarily involving a symmetrical allocation of seats that could elect one or more councillors per ward. The most important implication is that to do so – depending on the limitations imposed by outcomes of the council composition component of the review in relation to the size and the number of council seats – would likely require the abandonment of the adherence to the historic pre-amalgamation boundaries.

We acknowledge that this may be seen by some residents as discarding the history of those communities (in particular Wallace and Elma) but it can also be seen as an indication of the emergence of the modern North Perth community that should form the foundation of an equitable and effective system of representation for the future.

⁵ Note also that the area included Listowel ward was increased in the one ward boundary adjustment in North Perth. In 2009, increased the size of the Listowel ward by adding territory from Elma ward so that the entire Listowel urban settlement area was in the same ward, an adjustment linked to the Official Plan for Perth County.