

2023 Council Composition & Ward Boundary Review Municipality of North Perth

Discussion Paper G: Is a Ward Boundary Review Necessary?

The objective of a council composition and ward boundary review is to conduct a comprehensive review of North Perth’s electoral arrangements to develop an effective and equitable system of representation. As explained in the preceding Discussion Papers, a series of questions related to the future composition of council have shaped the options to be considered in the ward boundary review, including whether Councillors will even be elected in wards.

Although the Council resolution of July 10, 2023 affirmed support for maintaining a ward system to elect Councillors in North Perth, the present electoral map must still be evaluated as a way to help identify which features need to change to achieve effective representation ([Topical Discussion Paper F](#)) and which features might remain in place.

North Perth’s present ward design dates from the amalgamation that took place when the municipality’s population was approximately 11,600. Today the population is about 17,600¹ and growth is projected to reach approximately 25,000 by 2036, primarily in Listowel and Atwood.² As a community changes, so should its electoral arrangements, more than ever when there are perceptible and inequitable discrepancies in the population of existing wards, as will be discussed below.

A necessary step in a ward boundary review is to assess the extent to which the existing wards meet the guiding principles for a ward system that achieves the goal of effective representation (see [Topical Discussion Paper F](#)). In this Discussion paper, the status quo will therefore be subject to the same “tests” as any alternative designs using the guiding principles (representation by population, population and electoral trends, representation of communities of interest, and geographical and topographical features as boundaries) to identify its strengths and weaknesses.

¹ 2023 Total Population Including Census Undercount, Watson & Associates Economists Ltd.

² County of Perth 2023 Official Plan Update - Comprehensive Review, Watson & Associates Economists Ltd., September 2023.



Preliminary Insights into the North Perth Ward System

Before developing alternatives to the current system in the Ward Boundary Review phase, then, it is appropriate to apply the same guiding principles to the current system to determine whether it is actually still viable and, if not, what shortcomings need to be considered in designing alternatives.

Representation by Population: One goal of this review is to design a system of representation that achieves relative parity in the population of the wards, with some degree of variation acceptable in light of population densities and other demographic factors across the municipality. The indicator of success in a ward design is the extent to which the individual wards approach an “optimal” size.

In a symmetrical ward system where each ward elects the same number of councillors (see [Topical Discussion Paper E](#)), optimal size can be understood as a mid-point on a scale where the term “optimal” (O) describes a ward with a population within 5% on either side of the calculated optimal size which is itself identified by dividing the overall population of the municipality by the number of wards (or councillors). The classification “below/above optimal” (O+ or O-) is applied to a ward with a population between 6% and 25% on either side of the optimal size. A ward that is labelled “outside the range” (OR+ or OR-) indicates that its population is greater than 25% above or below the optimal ward size. The adoption of a 25% maximum variation is based on federal redistribution legislation, but is widely used in municipalities like North Perth where there are urban concentrations of different sizes as well as extensive rural territory and anticipated residential developments in the future.

At amalgamation the overall population of the Municipality of North Perth was approximately 11,600, meaning that in a three-ward system, the optimal population size for a ward would be 3,877 with an acceptable range of variation between 2,750 and 4,846. Population data for 1996 (see Table 3) indicates that the population of one proposed wards (based on the former Township of Elma) was “optimal” but the other two of the three proposed wards fell “outside the range.” A ward system composed of these three wards failed to meet the representation by population principle when the municipality was created and the minor adjustment made in 2009 maintained that imbalance. By 2023, the divergence in population between the largest and smallest wards has increased.



Table 1: 1996 Population by Ward

Pre-Amalgamation Municipality	Census Population 1996	Variance
Elma Ward	3,978	1.02 (O)
Listowel Ward	5,262	1.35 (OR+)
Wallace Ward	2,382	0.61 (OR-)
Total/Optimal	11,622	3,877

Table 2: 2021 Population by Ward

Pre-Amalgamation Municipality	Census Population 2021	Variance
Elma Ward	3,940	0.76 (O-)
Listowel Ward	9,460	1.83 (OR+)
Wallace Ward	2,150	0.41 (OR-)
Total/Optimal	15,550	5,183

As has already been noted, though, the goal of population parity was actually not a premise of the ward system in what in Topical Discussion Paper E (page 4) we called the “founding compromise;” rather, the wards 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 “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 (See Topical Discussion Paper E, Figure 1).

After a single election, the composition of Council was altered by making the position of Deputy Mayor a separate office and by reducing the number of seats assigned to the Listowel ward from 4 to 3, giving the residents of that ward the same representation as Elma. In terms of the “optimal” dimension each councillor in Listowel now represented 1.47 people for every 1 person represented by the Wallace Councillors based on 1996 population figures.



Table 3: Comparative Population by Ward 1996

Wards	1996 Census Population	Seats on North Perth Council		Population per Councillor
		Formula	Actual	
Elma Ward	3,978	3	3.34	1,326
Listowel Ward	5,262	4	4.42	1,315
Wallace Ward	2,382	2	2.00	1,191
Total/Optimal	11,622	9		1,291

Table 4: Comparative Population by Ward 1999*

Wards	1996 Census Population	Seats on North Perth Council		Population per Councillor
		Formula	Actual	
Elma Ward	3,978	3	3.34	1,326
Listowel Ward*	5,262	3*	4.42	1,754
Wallace Ward	2,382	2	2.00	1,191
Total/Optimal	11,622	8		1,453

*After the re-allocation of ward representation in 1999 but using 1996 population figures



Table 5: Comparative Population by Ward 2021

Wards	2021 Census Population	Seats on North Perth Council		Population per Councillor
		Formula	Actual	
Elma Ward	3,940	3	3.34	1,313
Listowel Ward	9,460	3	4.42	3,153
Wallace Ward	2,150	2	2.00	1,075
Total/Optimal	15,550	8		1,944

Since the three current wards in North Perth provide neither population parity nor achieve the more complicated “proportional equality,” this Review will address these shortcomings by developing single-member wards that place a high priority on population parity.

Population and Electoral Trends: Ward boundary reviews consider anticipated population trends to ensure that the ward structure initially provides effective representation for the 2026 municipal election. Future population growth in North Perth over the next decade will be concentrated in the Listowel Urban Settlement Area and to a lesser extent in Atwood; each of these areas is in a ward where the population was at or well in excess of the optimum figure in 1996; the wards will be even more unbalanced by 2026. In other words, if left unchanged, the existing three ward configuration will not likely meet population parity over time and will therefore fall short of this principle as well.

Protection of Communities of Interest: Electoral districts in Canada are not traditionally considered to be merely arithmetic divisions of the electorate designed to achieve parity of voting power. Rather, they are part of a system “which gives due weight to voter parity but admits other considerations where necessary”³. One of the customary other considerations is “community of interest.” The rationale is that

³ *Reference re Provincial Electoral Boundaries (Sask.)* [1991], known as the Carter decision, page 35.



electoral districts should, as far as possible, be cohesive units and areas with common interests related to representation.

There is continuing reference to the pre-amalgamation historic identities of Elma, Wallace and Listowel in contemporary North Perth through the names attached to community centres, for example, and various landmarks (and even the names of the wards).

The names and historic geographic boundaries of the former municipalities that are now part of North Perth can be recognized and acknowledged in the life of the municipality; however, preserving them as wards after twenty-five years as a single municipality largely because they are “familiar” hampers the goal of providing equitable and effective representation for all residents, as discussed in relation to achieving population parity.

While the present wards capture the former community of interest symbolized by the three pre-amalgamation municipalities, the municipality’s population and economy have grown in size and changed in composition, prompting a ward system that more appropriately reflects the distribution of residential and commercial clusters found in modern North Perth.

Geographical and Topographical Features as Boundaries: With the exception of the present boundary between the Listowel and Elma wards that was modified in 2009, North Perth’s ward boundaries have a long history drawn along a single man-made feature. The boundary lines themselves are remarkably clean and clear-cut. Perth Line 86 provides an inflexible demarcation between the former Wallace and Elma Townships east and west of Listowel while the boundaries of the Listowel ward closely encircle the visible urban landscape.

There are two major arterial road in rural North Perth, Perth Line 86 and Road 164 (Hwy 23); one is used as a ward boundary but the other is not. Following on from the community of interest principle, however, it is not obvious that the residents on either



side Perth Line 86 could be considered two distinctive social or economic communities of interest were it not for the historic division into the former Townships.

The present ward boundaries meet this principle in a literal sense but that achievement is compromised by the location of the lines themselves.

Effective Representation: The specific principles listed above are all subject to the overriding principle of “effective representation” as enunciated by the Supreme Court of Canada.⁴ The concept of effective representation was derived from the equality provision of the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms*: the Court noted that relative parity of voting power was a prime, but not an exclusive, condition of effective representation since other factors – such as those summarized above – contribute to the achievement of effective representation.

In North Perth, there are significantly different relationships between constituents and Councillors that hinder the achievement of effective representation; some Councillors have fifty per cent more constituents to serve than others while some electors get to vote for two Councillors while others get to vote for three. The present configuration embeds a dilution of the votes cast by certain electors compared to others and weakens the democratic expectation that when the eight Councillors decide on a matter before them each vote cast on behalf of a relatively equal number of residents.

The present ward boundaries fall well short of meeting this principle.

Overview: No ward design is likely to meet all the principles in their entirety; however, the best designs maximize adherence to the principles, especially in relation to representation by population and effective representation. It is our understanding of existing case law that deviations from the specific principles can be justified by other criteria drawn from the Carter decision in a manner that is more supportive of effective representation.

Our preliminary assessment points to the conclusion that a Ward Boundary Review in North Perth is necessary.

⁴ *Reference re Provincial Electoral Boundaries (Sask.)* [1991].



Table 6: Existing North Perth Ward Configuration Evaluation Summary

Principle	Does the Current Ward Structure Meet the Respective Principle? ¹	Comment
Representation by Population	No	Two of the three wards exceed the $\pm 25\%$ range of variation.
Population and Electoral Trends	No	Population growth will not overcome the existing population imbalance.
Protection of Communities of Interest	Largely Successful	The wards essentially preserve the historic pre-amalgamation municipalities that were dissolved more than twenty-five years ago.
Geographical and Topographical Features as Boundaries	Yes	Clear and recognizable boundaries.
Effective Representation	No	The relationships between constituents and Councillors hinder the achievement of effective representation

¹The degree to which each guiding principle is satisfied is ranked as “**Yes**” (fully satisfied), “**Largely Successful**,” “**Partially Successful**,” or “**No**” (not satisfied).