

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

## Discussion Paper D: The Method of Election for Councillors

As observed in other Discussion Papers, the *Municipal Act, 2001* offers no guidance on key questions about municipal electoral systems. In this case, there is a choice available: should the municipality elect its councillors “by general vote or wards or by any combination of general vote and wards.”

The distinction between the two systems is fairly simple. In one system, referred to as a “general vote” system in the *Municipal Act, 2001* (or as an “at-large” system in popular terminology), the municipality is a single electoral district which includes all seats to be filled by Councillors. In other words, the entire municipality can be considered a “multi-member” electoral district. In the other system (a ward system), the municipality is divided into a number of geographic areas that elect representatives in separate contests. Within this arrangement, the “district magnitude” (that is the number of seats to be elected in each district) may vary from one (a “single-member” ward) to some larger number (a “multi-member” ward), or in the case of North Perth the number of seats varies from ward to ward. This topic will be the subject of Discussion Paper E.

There is no consistency across Ontario municipalities in the use of the two systems: some municipalities with small populations use wards, such as the Townships of Zorra (8,000) and Georgian Bay (2,300), while some municipalities with larger populations, such as the City of Stratford (31,000), City of Niagara Falls (85,000) and the City of Sarnia (75,000) do not. A handful use a combined ward-general vote system to elect Councillors (most notably Thunder Bay<sup>1</sup>) as permitted under the *Municipal Act, 2001*. There is also no conventional benchmark (such a population or geographic size) to apply to indicate whether one system or the other is appropriate. A comparative list of similar municipalities can be found in Table 1.

A ward system is the status quo in North Perth – the “default solution” – that was originally adopted as part of the transition from three separate component parts into the

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<sup>1</sup> Note that the Thunder Bay combination applies to electing Councillors, whereas in North Perth a ward system is used to elect councillors but the at-large option is used to elect the separate office of Deputy Mayor. See also Discussion Paper C.



new municipality. As suggested in reference to other parts of the electoral system, maintaining a ward system requires a rationale rather than simply being accepted because it is familiar.

The Consultant Team would not claim that there is a definitively “better” system for North Perth. Rather, the method used to elect councillors should fit the contemporary municipality. For example:

A general vote system would be most appropriate if . . .	A ward system would be most appropriate if . . .
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the municipality is (or should be) considered one political community.</li> <li>• Councillors are expected to place greater emphasis on the well-being of the entire Municipality ahead of the well-being of its particular parts.</li> <li>• members of the public are prepared to approach any Councillor for assistance.</li> <li>• electors want more choices.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the municipality is composed of a number of distinctive political communities.</li> <li>• Councillors need to be mindful of the impact of Municipal-wide decisions on particular communities within the municipality.</li> <li>• members of the public prefer to approach a Councillor who has some connection to their neighbourhood or community.</li> <li>• electors want clear choices.</li> </ul>

As well there are positive and negative implications that can be considered in deciding whether to keep a ward system in North Perth or to elect all members of Council by general vote.

### **Implications of a Ward System of Representation**

Advantages	Disadvantages
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Councillors are more likely to be truly local representatives, easily accessible to residents and aware of local issues.</li> <li>• Significant communities of interest are more likely to be represented.</li> <li>• It is less likely that one particular point of view or sectional interest will dominate the Council.</li> <li>• May provide more cost-efficient government, primarily by eliminating duplication of administrative work</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Councillors may be elected on minor or parochial issues and may lack a perspective of what is to the benefit of the Municipality as a whole.</li> <li>• Voters may have a restricted choice of candidates in elections for individual wards.</li> <li>• There is a greater likelihood of acclamations.</li> <li>• There may be problems if a Councillor is not performing effectively or is clashing with some electors, as electors in a</li> </ul>



Advantages	Disadvantages
<p>communicating the same information to and from two or more Councillors.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Simplifies the election process for electors.</li> </ul>	<p>single-member ward have no alternative (knowledgeable) Councillor to approach.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ward boundaries may be susceptible to change caused by demographic shifts.</li> <li>• Population changes can lead to unequal workloads for Councillors until ward boundaries are reviewed.</li> <li>• If a Councillor resigns or dies, it may be necessary to hold a by-election to select a replacement.</li> <li>• May discourage new candidates if an incumbent is generally popular or if an incumbent who is popular with a dominant community of interest is running.</li> </ul>

### Implications of an At-Large System of Representation

Advantages	Disadvantages
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Electors have greater choice and flexibility in elections (each voter has the opportunity to consider every candidate in the Council election).</li> <li>• Electors are able to select the candidates they think will do the best job, rather than having to make a choice among candidates who happen to run in their ward.</li> <li>• Residents will have a larger number of Councillors to approach with their concerns.</li> <li>• The system promotes the concept of a Municipal-wide focus, with Councillors being elected by, and concerned for, the Municipality as a whole, rather than placing a priority on more parochial interests.</li> <li>• The likelihood of acclamations is reduced.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There would be no designated voices for particular neighbourhoods.</li> <li>• At-large elections can lead to significant communities of interest and points of view being under-represented (or even un-represented).</li> <li>• The system can lead to Councillors being relatively inaccessible for residents of some parts of the Municipality (each Councillor has 13,000+ constituents).</li> <li>• Candidates who appeal to areas where voter turnout is highest tend to be elected disproportionately.</li> <li>• Large numbers of candidates on the ballot can be confusing for voters.</li> <li>• Candidates must campaign across the entire municipality; this may make the cost of a campaign prohibitive (especially for newcomers).</li> <li>• The format can lead to confusion of responsibilities and duplication of effort on the part of Councillors (everybody on Council represents everybody in the municipality).</li> </ul>

It is primarily because North Perth was created as an amalgamation of three existing municipalities that a ward system was implemented as a component part of the Ministerial Restructuring Order and moreover that the former municipal boundaries were



used to delineate the wards themselves. This arrangement respected the history of the communities that compose what is now the Municipality of North Perth. Whether those historic identities are still relevant (or must be maintained) as the basis for electoral representation in 2026 and beyond is one of the questions that this review will examine to help Council decide whether to retain wards or to dissolve them in favour of electing Councillors at-large.

Of course, if the alternative of dissolving the wards to elect Councillors is widely supported in the public consultations, the Consultant Team would share that information with Council along with the reasons why residents support it. The second phase of the electoral review would not be necessary if there are to be no wards in 2026 and beyond, although a number of decisions related to the composition of council already raised in this and other papers would still need to be settled. In addition, a by-law to dissolve the wards can be appealed to the Ontario Land Tribunal.

Table 1 – Municipal Electoral Voting Systems

Municipality	Population (2021)	# of Councillors	Electoral Voting System
<b>Perth County</b>			
North Perth	15,538	10	Wards
Perth East	12,595	7	Wards
Perth South	3,776	7	At-Large
St. Marys	7,386	7	At-Large
Stratford	33,232	11	At-Large
West Perth	9,038	11	Wards
Burlington	186,948	7	Wards
Kitchener	256,885	11	Wards
Mapleton	10,839	5	At-Large
Niagara Falls	94,415	9	At-Large
Orangeville	30,167	7	At-Large
Trent Hills	13,861	7	Wards
Waterloo	121,436	8	Wards
Wellington North	12,431	5	Wards
Whitby	138,501	9	Wards