

City of Port Colborne Council Composition and Ward Boundary Review 2024-25 Backgrounder

Discussion Paper A: Port Colborne's Electoral System

Background

The City of Port Colborne has retained Watson & Associates Economists Ltd. and Drs. Robert J. Williams and Zachary Spicer, hereinafter referred to as the Consultant Team, to conduct a comprehensive and independent Council Composition and Ward Boundary Review.

The primary purpose of the study is to prepare City Council to make decisions on whether to maintain the existing council size and ward configuration or to adopt an alternative. Matters that are integral to a comprehensive review include the following:

- Is it appropriate to consider changing the composition of council (its size and/or how council is elected) as part of the review?
- Is it appropriate to consider dissolving the wards to elect all councillors at-large (in what the *Municipal Act* calls a “general vote” system)?
- If councillors will continue to be elected in wards, what guiding principles will be observed in the design of the wards?

This Council Composition and Ward Boundary Review is premised on the legitimate democratic expectation that municipal representation in Port Colborne on election day and throughout the term of Council will be effective, equitable, and an accurate reflection of the contemporary distribution of communities and people across the municipality.

Setting

The City of Port Colborne was incorporated as a village in 1870, becoming a town in 1918. The Town merged with the Village of Humberstone in 1952 and was re-incorporated as a City in 1965. At this point, the City's traditional four-ward model (with a Mayor, Deputy Mayor and two councillors elected at large) was abandoned in favour of a three-ward system with one councillor per ward. In 1969, an Ontario Municipal Board Order returned the City to a four-ward structure with two councillors elected per ward with the Mayor elected at-large, creating a council of nine members. This composition remains intact to this day.



Reviews of the current system have been conducted by staff and electoral review committees in 2005, 2009, 2013 and 2014. The 2009 review led to minor boundary changes in Ward 2 and 4. None of these exercises involved independent reviewers or consultants. The latest review began in 2020 and was intended to be completed by a citizen-led review committee. The COVID-19 pandemic began before the committee was to hold its first meeting and staff took charge of the review. At that time, staff concluded that:

- The majority of municipalities in Niagara use a ward system;
- All of the comparator municipalities within the Region operate with councils of 7-9 members;
- Using eligible elector counts provided by MPAC for the 2022 election,¹ three of the four wards have more than 15% variation from the average, while one is outside of range with 28% variance.

Staff argued that while the ward boundaries have remained static for decades, population growth had not warranted an immediate review. An independent review had been recommended several times in the recent past, however, leading staff to recommend that council seek an external consultant to complete an independent review.

Topical Discussion Papers A to F

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

- *Discussion Paper A – Port Colborne’s Electoral System*
- Discussion Paper B – What is the Optimal Size for a Municipal Council?
- Discussion Paper C – The Component Parts of the Port Colborne’s Council
- Discussion Paper D – The Method of Election for Councillors
- Discussion Paper E – Guiding Principles to Design Wards
- Discussion Paper F – Is a Ward Boundary Review Necessary?

¹ <https://pub-portcolborne.escribemeetings.com/filestream.ashx?DocumentId=1352>