

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

Discussion Paper B: What is the Optimal Size for a Municipal Council?

Context

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 (subsections 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* (Ontario Regulation 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. Port Colborne’s Council is composed of nine members, four above the minimum size.

When compared to other municipalities across Niagara Region (Figure Bi below), Port Colborne Council is of similar size to most municipalities in the Region. Nine councillors is the average across the Region, with only St. Catharines and Welland having more (13). Four municipalities have fewer than 9: Fort Erie (7), Pelham (7), West Lincoln (7) and Wainfleet (5). Municipalities with similar populations to Port Colborne (Thorold and Niagara-on-the-Lake) also have 9 councillors. This is not to imply that the size of council should be reduced or increased, but rather to acknowledge that the size of Port Colborne’s Council is in line with much of the Region, including its direct comparator municipalities within the Region.



Figure Bi
Population and Council Members across Niagara Region

Municipality	2021 Population	Composition of Local Council (Excluding Head of Council)	Population per Councillor
St. Catharines	136,803	12 (6 wards)	11,400
Niagara Falls	94,415	8 (at-large)	11,802
Welland	55,750	12 (6 wards)	4,646
Fort Erie	32,901	6 (6 wards)	5,484
Grimsby	28,883	8 (4 wards)	3,610
Lincoln	25,719	8 (4 wards)	3,215
Thorold	23,816	8 (at-large)	2,977
Port Colborne	20,003	8 (4 wards)	2,500
Niagara-on-the-Lake	19,088	8 (at-large)	2,386
Pelham	18,192	6 (3 wards)	3,032
West Lincoln	15,454	6 (3 wards)	2,576
Wainfleet	6,887	4 (at-large)	1,721
Average	39,828	8	4,612

While other municipalities within the Niagara Region may be most familiar and the most useful comparators when considering the size of Port Colborne's Council, it is also useful to compare the municipality to those outside of the Region. Across Ontario, South Frontenac, Cobourg, Huntsville, Essex and Wilmot are of similar size and also part of two-tier systems. Of these, South Frontenac and Huntsville also have 9 members (including the Head of Council). Including the Head of Council, Wilmot has 6, Cobourg has 7 members, and Essex has 8. All this is to say that, across Ontario, Port Colborne is not out of line with comparator municipalities, but there are a variety of electoral arrangements that suit municipalities of similar sizes.



Included within the governance framework of Port Colborne is an elected Regional Councillor, who is not a member of local council and does not have a formal connection to Port Colborne council. This Councillor is elected at-large. The Regional Councillor may update council on regional matters, but this is not required. The Mayor also sits on Regional Council, meaning that only one member of Port Colborne council formally sits on both the local and Regional councils.

The *Municipal Act, 2001* authorizes a municipal council to determine the number of local councillors (section 217) and the method by which they are to be elected (section 222).

The optimal size of a municipal council depends 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 workload undertaken by representatives varies with each individual councillor. The amount of time spent on council business is not easily quantified but serving on council is not a typical job. 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.

In Port Colborne, ward councillors are considered to be “part time” and receive a yearly stipend of \$22,973. This means that each council member must have some additional source of income, which would naturally draw them into other duties aside from their role as a local councillor. As a result, the additional duties councillors can take on outside of their formal role at council and committee meetings could be limited. As well, their ability to attend community events or respond to inquiries or calls for service from constituents would be naturally more constrained than someone in a “full-time” council role.

Responsiveness: The heart of “effective representation” (to be discussed more fully in relation to the guiding principles for a ward system – see Discussion Paper E) 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.¹

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 Port Colborne. 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 local 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. Again, the “part-time” nature of the position may affect their responsiveness.

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.

Considering these three perspectives will provide insights for considering the optimal size of the municipal Council in Port Colborne.

Preliminary Insights into the Composition of Port Colborne’s Council

In Discussion Paper C, four components of Port Colborne’s current governance structure are described: the Mayor, the Deputy Mayor, Local Councillors and the Regional Councillor, adding up to a nine-member Council (as mentioned, the elected Regional Councillor does not sit as a member of Port Colborne’s Council). The most basic question to ask at the outset is, “is this the right number?”

Examining the composition of council is part of the mandate for the Consultant Team. Through the various evaluative exercises that will be undertaken as part of the Review, the Consultant Team may identify how alternative council compositions would align with the objectives of the Review. While a council of 9 is in line with comparators in Niagara Region, this does not necessarily mean that it is optimal for the City. In subsequent papers, the Consultant Team will delve further into this question, particularly in the final paper (Discussion Paper F) where population in each Ward will be examined, along with

¹ **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.



considering whether an at-large system, single-member districts, an elected deputy mayor and “full-time” councillors would be better suited for Port Colborne.

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?