

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

Discussion Paper D: The Method of Election for Councillors

“By general vote or wards.” As observed in other Discussion Papers, the *Municipal Act, 2001* offers no guidance on key questions about what electoral system should be used in municipalities. In Ontario, there are straightforward choices 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 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 that includes all seats 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 several electoral districts 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 a few cases, the number of seats varies from ward to ward.

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 Cornwall (48,000), Niagara Falls (85,000), and Sarnia (75,000) do not. A handful use a combined ward-general vote system to elect councillors (most notably Thunder Bay¹) as permitted under the *Municipal Act, 2001*. There is also no conventional benchmark (such as population or geographic size) to apply to indicate when or whether a change from one system to another is appropriate.

A ward system is the status quo in Port Colborne – the “default solution” – that was originally adopted in 1969 (see Discussion Paper A). As suggested in reference to other parts of the municipal 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 as such. Rather, the method used to elect councillors should fit the contemporary municipality in question.

¹ Note that the Thunder Bay combination applies to electing councillors, whereas in Port Colborne a ward system is used to elect councillors, but the at-large option is used to elect the separate office of Regional Councillor. See also Discussion Paper C.



A general vote system would be most appropriate if ...	A ward system would be most appropriate if ...
<ul style="list-style-type: none">the City is (or should be) considered one political community.representatives are expected to place greater emphasis on the well-being of the entire City ahead of the well-being of just one part (a ward).Residents would have multiple representatives they could access for service or advocacy.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">the City is composed of several distinctive political communities.councillors need to be mindful of the impact of municipal-wide decisions on particular communities within the City.members of the public prefer to approach a councillor who has some connection to their neighbourhood or community.electors want clear choices.

As well, there are positive and negative implications that can be considered in deciding whether to keep a ward system 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">councillors are more likely to be truly local representatives, tied to specific geographies of the City, more easily accessible to residents and aware of local issues.significant communities of interest are more likely to be represented.it is less likely that one point of view or sectional interest will dominate the Council.simplifies the election process for electors.voters can hold their representatives directly accountable for their decisions or performance while in office.lower campaign costs may encourage greater competition.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">councillors may be elected on minor or parochial issues and may lack a perspective of what is to the benefit of the City as a whole.voters may have a restricted choice of candidates in elections for individual wards.there is a greater likelihood of acclamations.there may be problems if a councillor is not performing effectively or is clashing with some electors, since electors in a single-member ward have no alternative (knowledgeable) councillor to approach.population changes can lead to unequal workloads for councillors until ward boundaries are reviewed.a general vote system may discourage new candidates if an incumbent is generally popular or if an incumbent



Advantages	Disadvantages
	<p>who is popular with a dominant community of interest is running.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">representatives may be narrowly focused on their own wards, rather than city-wide priorities.

Implications of an At-Large System of Representation

Advantages	Disadvantages
<ul style="list-style-type: none">electors have greater choice and flexibility in elections (each voter can consider every candidate in the council election).electors can 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.residents will have a larger number of councillors to approach with their concerns.the system promotes the concept of a City-wide focus, with councillors being elected by, and concerned for, the City as a whole, rather than placing a priority on more parochial interests.the likelihood of acclamations is reduced.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">there would be no designated voices for particular communities. Those elected could come from a single neighbourhood and lack familiarity with other parts of the communityat-large elections can lead to smaller or even significant communities of interest and points of view being under-represented (or not represented at all).The system can lead to councillors being relatively inaccessible for residents of some parts of the City (each Councillor has about 20,000 constituents).candidates who appeal to areas where voter turnout is highest tend to be elected disproportionately.large numbers of candidates on the ballot can be confusing for voters or can reduce voter turnout.the resources needed to run a competitive campaign would be substantially more than a ward election, potentially dissuading some from running.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) but constituency workload may fall disproportionately on a few councillors.



Despite the attractiveness of a general vote system to some residents in Port Colborne, the case for retaining a ward system is strong and can be made in relation to at least three main themes: the geographic size of the municipality, the presence of several discrete population clusters and the need to ensure representation for the rural community. Observations drawn from our own research include the following:

- Port Colborne is a large geographic area; it is an unreasonable expectation that candidates would have to canvas the entire municipality during an election and then for part-time councillors to successfully represent all 20,000+ residents over a four-year term of office.
- There are several distinctive communities in Port Colborne; some are well-established and close knit while others are newer and are bringing demographic changes to the City. For instance, Port Colborne has a sizable rural community. While this area is large in geographic size, it has a small population. In an at-large system, it is a possibility that every representative could come from the urbanized portion of the city.
- Residents need fair representation at the Council table especially considering forecast population growth and intensification in a few locations within the City.

As noted earlier, a ward system is the “default” arrangement in Port Colborne and can be justified for the reasons just presented. The Consultant Team is prepared to move forward with this review on that basis.

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 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 decisions related to the composition of council already raised in this and other papers (see Discussion Papers B and C) would still need to be settled.

“District magnitude”: If a ward system is preferred for Port Colborne, it is worth considering how councillors are elected in the wards. Currently, each ward has two representatives, but a single-member ward system is widely used across Ontario.

The two-member arrangement has advantages, especially given that each councillor is “part time”. In this system, residents have two representatives and two outlets to express concerns, seek support or request information (in addition, of course, to the City of Port Colborne’s Customer Service Division).

However, it is possible that this may create a disproportionate workload for one of the two representatives and create confusion when a constituent with a problem approaches both councillors, each of whom then approaches city staff. This may also make it more difficult to hold councillors to account. It is also possible that, rather than



having two voices to articulate the perspectives of residents of the ward, the two councillors may take opposite viewpoints, thereby cancelling out the view of residents of the ward.

In a system with one councillor per ward, residents have a clear line of accountability. They would, however, not be able to access two members of council for ward concerns or requests for local information. Two councillors per ward contributes to the overall size of council which could complicate and prolong debate. It also increases the size of wards (since there are only four) which makes it more difficult for councillors to stay on top of issues across their entire ward.

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?