

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

Discussion Paper F: Is a Ward Boundary Review Necessary?

The objective of this study is to conduct a comprehensive review of Port Colborne's ward boundary system and council composition. In Discussion Paper D, the Consultant Team identified three guiding principles that will guide any review of the ward boundaries in Port Colborne, working on the assumption that City Council endorses the retention of wards:

- Balancing the present and future population distribution among the wards;
- Respecting established neighbourhoods and communities (communities of interest); and
- Respecting geographical features and the defining natural and infrastructure boundaries.

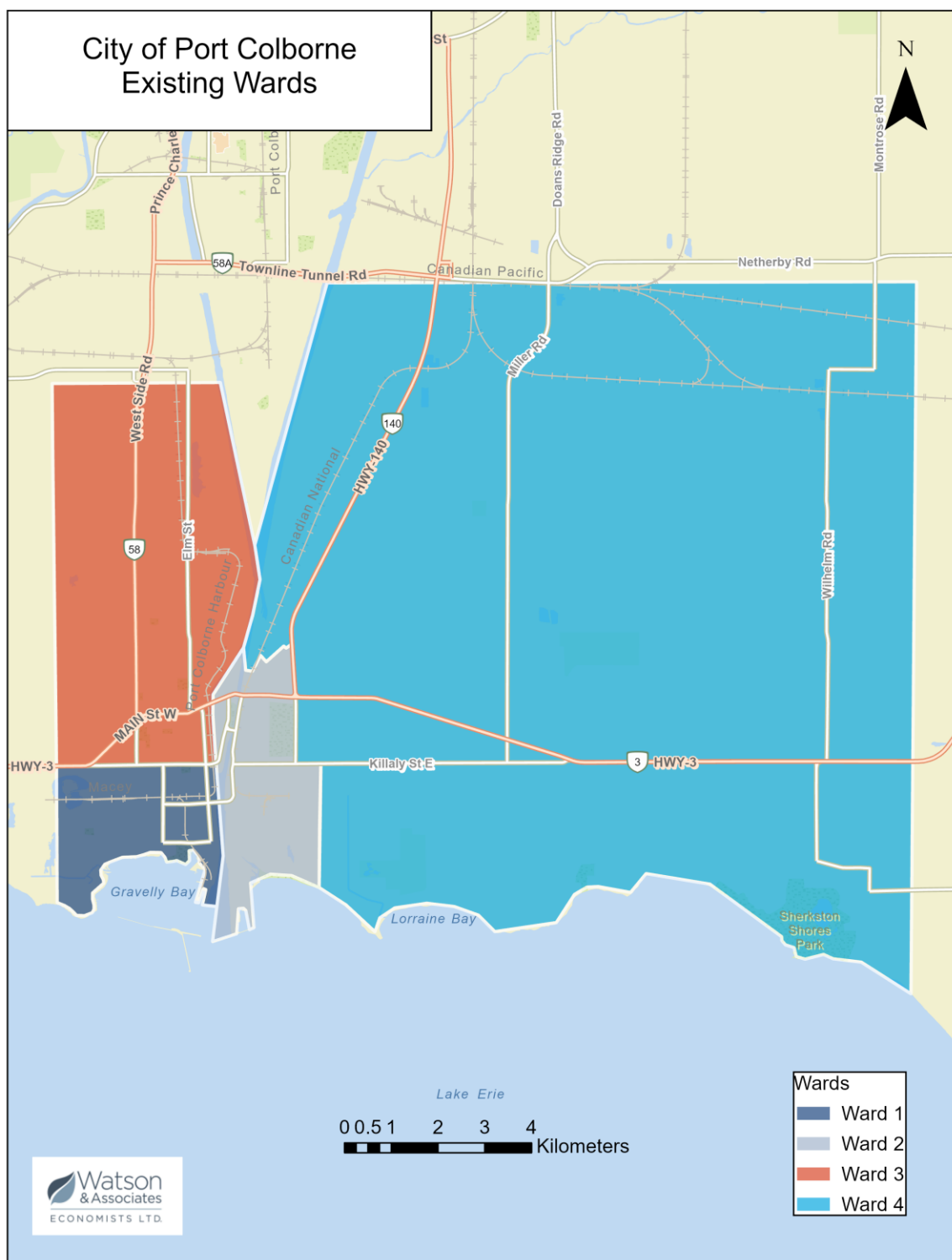
As described in the discussion paper, these principles are all subject to the overriding principle of “effective representation” as enunciated by the Supreme Court of Canada.¹ The concept of effective representation was derived from the equality provision of the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms* related to the right to vote and, by extension, the right to be represented equitably in the deliberations of government.

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 boundary system that achieves the goal of effective representation. In this Discussion Paper, the status quo will therefore be subject to the same “tests” as any alternative designs to identify its strengths and weaknesses. The existing ward boundary configuration for the City of Port Colborne is presented in Figure Fi.

¹ Reference re Provincial Electoral Boundaries (Sask.) [1991], known as the Carter decision.



Figure Fi: Existing Ward Boundaries





Balancing the present and future population among the wards: 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 City, both now and into the near future. 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, 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. For the Port Colborne Ward Boundary Review, variances of between plus or minus 25 percent of what is called the “optimal” ward population are considered within range. The adoption of a 25% maximum variation is based on federal redistribution legislation but is widely used in municipalities like Port Colborne where there are both higher density urban concentrations as well as many smaller settlements and rural territory where residential development may be expected in the future. The principle is intended to ensure that residents have comparable access to their elected representative and that the workload of these representatives is relatively balanced. 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.

Figure Fii – Comparative Ward Population and Variance (2021)

Ward	Area (Sq. Km)	2021		
		Population	Population Variance	Optimal Range
Ward 1	4.5	5,988	1.20	O+
Ward 2	5.3	3,894	0.78	O-
Ward 3	17.0	5,822	1.16	O+
Ward 4	96.8	4,329	0.86	O-
Total/Average	123.7	20,033	5,008	

As illustrated in Figure Fii, none of the wards are outside the 25% variance range. However, none can be classified as “optimal” ($\pm 5\%$). In fact, there is a sizeable variation between the wards, with the councillors for the most populated ward (Ward 1) representing over 2,000 more people than the least populated (Ward 2) – a significant amount, given it is almost 10% of the total population.



Port Colborne has experienced modest growth through much of its history. Between 2011 and 2021, the population grew by 9% (or 1,609), in line with the 10.8% growth experienced throughout the Region of Niagara. The Region is expected to experience significant growth in the future, with a total population of 694,000 anticipated by 2051. Port Colborne is expected to experience a growth rate of slightly under 1% per year, with a population of 24,100 anticipated by 2031. With substantial population disparities between the existing wards, it is natural to expect these disparities to worsen given the rapid growth within the Region.

Respecting Established Neighbourhoods and Communities (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” (Carter decision, page 35). One of the customary other considerations is “community of interest.” The rationale is that electoral districts should, as far as possible, be cohesive units and areas with common interests related to representation.

In the municipal context, “community of interest” is frequently linked to “neighbourhoods” since the neighbourhood is the most identifiable geographic point in most people’s lives; it is where they live. More importantly, the responsibilities of the municipality are also closely associated with where people live: roads and their maintenance, the utilities that are connected to or associated with their dwelling, and the myriad of social, cultural, environmental, and recreational services are often based on residential communities. Even municipal taxation is inextricably linked to one’s dwelling. Identifying such communities of interest recognizes that geographic location brings shared perspectives that should be reflected in the municipal representational process.

In most municipalities there are more communities of interest or neighbourhoods than there are electoral districts, so wards will of necessity have to be created by grouping together such building blocks for the purposes of representation. This principle addresses two perspectives: what is divided by ward boundaries and what is joined together. Alternative ward configurations will therefore be assessed in terms of how successfully they separate or aggregate certain communities of interest into plausible units of representation. The first priority is that communities ought not to be divided internally; as a rule, lines are drawn around communities, not through them. Secondly, as far as possible wards should group together communities with common interests.

Port Colborne is a municipality that is home to several identified neighbourhoods and communities and both urban and rural areas. Several of the City’s communities are in the large rural portion of the municipality and much of this area is contained within Ward 4, although parts of Ward 2 and 3 are also rural. The city also has an “east” and “west” of the City, on either side of the Welland Canal. The Canal provides a natural barrier between some of the communities.



The current ward boundaries largely contain identifiable communities of interest within Port Colborne, primarily Wards 1 and 2 that each include well-established residential neighbourhoods and Ward 4 which includes most of the rural portion of the City. The exception to this pattern is the present Ward 3 that includes both suburban residential neighbourhoods and rural lands roughly between Stonebridge Drive and the northern municipal boundary.

On balance the wards are geographically large enough to encompass identifiable neighbourhoods, but the present Ward 1-Ward 3 boundary along Killaly Street divides the central urban communities into two parts west of the Canal while, as just noted, the Canal itself also divides the central urban communities.

Respecting Geographical Features and the Defining Natural and Infrastructure

Boundaries: The most significant physical boundary within Port Colborne is the Welland Canal, which effectively bisects the municipality. Communities on either side of the Canal tend to be quite different, with the rural community further to the west being considerably different than the urban portion of the City. A large island rests within the Canal. Given it is in the middle of the Canal, the island likely has no natural home in the wards on either side, but it has been described to the Consultant Team in initial interviews that those on the island have more affinity to the western portion of the City.

The northern boundary of Ward 1 runs along Clarence Street – a major and well-known roadway in the ward – stopping at Steele Street and running north towards Elgin Street West, which is a rather minor street and slightly arbitrary boundary between Wards 1 and 3. Aligning that boundary with either Clarence Street or Killaly Street in the north might create a much more natural boundary. The northern boundary for Ward 2 also does not follow well-known or widely identified roads in the north.

As such, it cannot be said that the current ward boundaries largely reflect natural geographic boundaries.

Effective Representation: As noted earlier, effective representation is not based on the performance of incumbent Councillors. It is, rather, a concept that is premised on the on-going relationship between residents and elected officials – not just on the way the resident is “counted” on election day, although that is an important component of a fair system of representation. Is each individual ward a plausible and coherent unit of representation? Are they drawn in such a way that representatives can readily play the role expected of them? Do they provide equitable (that is, fair) access to Councillors for all residents of the municipality?

The combination of current population imbalances, amplified disparities based upon population projections over time, and the boundaries that, in part, do not adhere to natural and well-known infrastructure features suggests that the present wards in Port Colborne do not contribute to effective representation. Additionally, being “part-time” means that each Councillor – and the Mayor – have a significant workload, with little



direct administrative support to help them in their roles. As well, despite having eight Councillors, each one is accountable to one-quarter of the City.

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. The population of certain wards is out of line when compared to others. This will likely worsen over time, given the expected population growth within the Niagara Region. This trend has significant implications for councillor workload, responsiveness and representation. Given the current deficiencies in the system, it cannot be said that the ward system is providing effective representation to the residents of Port Colborne.

Our preliminary assessment, then, points to the conclusion that a Ward Boundary and Composition Review in Port Colborne is necessary.



Figure Fiii – Existing Port Colborne Ward Configuration Evaluation Summary

Principle	Does the Current Ward Structure Meet the Respective Principle? ¹	Comment
Balancing the present and future population distribution among the wards	No	Preliminary analysis would suggest that most wards are in the optimal range (i.e., 25% variation) but no wards are optimal (i.e., 5% variation). The disparity between the most and least populated wards is significant and will likely worsen over time.
Respecting established neighbourhoods and communities	Largely Successful	Current ward boundaries largely contain identifiable communities of interest.
Respecting geographical features and the defining natural and infrastructure boundaries	Partially Successful	Boundary lines are inconsistent in usage at times.
Effective Representation	No	Accelerating population imbalances, inconsistent boundary lines and the sizable range of population disparity hinder effective representation.

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



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?*