

REFLECTIONS ON AMALGAMATION: Where do we go from here?

INTRODUCTION

The Niagara Community Observatory produced a policy brief earlier this year entitled “Under the Knife & Under the Gun: An overview of regional government in Niagara.” The ominous feeling reflected in that title captures the tension that municipalities felt at the time. Twenty years ago the local government system was thrown into turmoil by the actions of a provincial government that wanted major change, but had difficulty articulating exactly what that change should be. Was history about to repeat itself?

A great sense of relief fell over the local governments that had felt themselves ‘under the knife and under the gun’ when the provincial government announced that there would be no forced restructuring, but that municipalities were free to address changes that they would like to consider. **Niagara should see this as an opportunity. There are continuing complaints about the system of government in the Niagara region. What should Niagara do to improve its governance system and the quality of service delivery to residents?**

This policy brief builds on the earlier NCO publication (April 2019) that provided background information about the current governance system in Niagara and suggested some changes that could be considered.



TOO MANY COUNCILLORS?

We have heard quite a bit about the fact that Niagara has too many councillors. With 126 councillors, Niagara has more than Halton and Peel, two regions with much higher populations.

Let's look at some context around the magic number of 126. Niagara has 13 municipalities. That means that Niagara's municipalities have an average of fewer than 10 councillors per municipality. The number of councillors in the area municipalities ranges from four (Wainfleet) to 12 (St. Catharines, Welland). These numbers are in line with the number of councillors in other municipalities across the province—Barrie, 10 councillors, not including the mayor; Burlington, 6 (which some residents feel is too few); Guelph, 12; London, 14; Peterborough, 10; Windsor, 10. It should not be surprising that municipalities gravitate toward these numbers. Ten or twelve councillors make a council large enough to provide adequate representation and small enough to allow for good discussion around the council table.

Regional council has 32 members, 12 of whom are mayors who also serve on the area municipal councils. There is general agreement that this number is too large to promote free and effective discussion around the council table. (In truth, there is not a council table; councillors sit around two horseshoe-shaped tiered tables which means that they cannot all see one another comfortably.) To a significant extent, council has compensated for this by the use of an effective committee system.

Whether the topic is the 126 total councillors or the 32 regional councillors, there is a feeling that the number should be reduced. Is there a downside to reducing the number of councillors?

Councillors fill two very important roles. First, they are the access points for residents; many residents know their municipal councillors personally through neighbourhood activities, sports associations, religious connections, and so forth. This gives residents a feeling of closeness and accountability with local governments that they do not experience with other levels of government.

Second, it is beneficial that the composition of council reflects the community that it serves. Ideally, a council would be representative in terms of gender, ethnicity, occupation, lived experience, and so forth. The smaller the size of a council, the more difficult it will be for it to reflect its community.

What is to be gained by having a smaller council? Large councils do not function well as debating and decision-making bodies. This is clear on the 32-member Regional Council—more on this later. However, the largest councils among the area municipalities have 12 members; this is clearly not beyond the optimum size for good discussion.

Reducing the number of councillors would save money. However, councillors in Niagara are paid fairly modest sums reflecting their part-time duties. Eliminating two or four councillors would hardly make a dent in the total municipal budget.

In fact, reducing the number of councillors in a municipality with a ward system would necessitate the redrawing of ward boundaries which is an expensive, time-consuming, and tension-evoking process. Is it really worth it to save a minimal amount of money?

As mentioned above, the regional council is the outlier. It is generally agreed that it is too large to function. The size and composition of regional council has evolved based on four principles, some factual and some cultural:

1. Niagara has 12 area municipalities of widely varying size.
2. Every municipality is entitled to at least one seat on council (not shared with another municipality).
3. All mayors should have a seat on regional council.
4. There should be some attempt at representation-by-population.

Unless we choose to change at least one of those principles, there is little possibility of reducing the size of regional council by a significant amount. The first three points mean that council starts with at least 12 members. The widely varying size of municipalities with the smallest municipality entitled to one member means that rep-by-pop generates a significant number of councillors. In fact, the 19 elected councillors mean that, by a strict application of mathematics, the largest municipalities are significantly under-represented. If we were completely serious about rep-by-pop, council would be about twice as large as it is now.

So why does Niagara Regional Council have so many more members than Halton or Peel? Halton has four area municipalities and Peel has three. If Niagara chose to have fewer area municipalities, it would then have fewer councillors. That idea is continually being floated but seems to have little broad support.

Does Niagara have too many councillors? Unless we are willing to vary one of the four principles stated above, Niagara will always have a relatively large number of councillors, and there seems to be little appetite to change any of those principles. Therefore, we should stop carping on the presumed evils of the number 126 unless we are willing to make the difficult decisions involved in moving away from one of the four principles.

In sum, any municipality that wants to increase or decrease its number of councillors, or change the method of election, or revise its ward boundaries should feel free to do so, but no municipality should feel coerced to make changes because of the fear of some magic number like 126. Do what's best for your municipality.

DUPLICATION AND OVERLAP

The other concern that is frequently expressed around two-tier governance systems is the possibility of duplication and overlap in service delivery between the two levels.

The table below indicates that most services have been unequivocally allocated to one level of government or the other. There can be no duplication or overlap in these areas. However, the services listed in the 'shared' column could lead to some difficulties.

Transit is currently under discussion and it provides an example of how area municipalities and the region can work together to increase the quality of service available to local residents. The road to regional cooperation on the delivery of this service has been difficult, but it now seems to be coming together.

Roads and traffic have been handled at the staff level through inter-municipal agreements. Residents sometimes have complaints which need to be considered carefully, but many potential areas of overlap and duplication have been

handled well.

Planning and economic development have been areas of difficulty between the 13 governments. The importance of these services to the future development of municipalities makes it understandable that they would be points of contention. There is no easy solution to this dilemma. However, if Niagara could put aside phantom discussions about council size and general complaints about overlap and duplication and instead focus on organizing these two related areas that really need attention, surely some working arrangement could be developed.

There needs to be less mindless complaining on the evils of sometimes non-existent overlap and duplication and more attention to finding solutions for services that are truly problematic.

Region	Shared	Area Municipalities
Police	Economic development	Arts and culture
Public health	Planning	Fire
Social services	Public transit*	Parks
Solid waste management	Roads and traffic	Potable water delivery
Wastewater treatment		Recreation
Water purification		Wastewater collection

*Under the terms of legislation public transit is the responsibility of the area municipalities. In practice, the region and some area municipalities have entered into an agreement to share responsibility for this service.

THE PATH FORWARD

Much discussion on this topic begins with solutions such as one Niagara or four cities before there is any consideration of what problems need to be solved. Niagara would do better to focus, first, on how to improve itself and identify problems, then seek solutions for those problems. This section starts from some very broad ideas and works to more specific ones.

All-Niagara Summit

A group of local residents could be convened who would consider one very straightforward question:

How can we make Niagara a better place to live?

The members of the summit should include representation from among local elected councillors, but members should come from all geographic areas and represent all sectors—social services, agriculture, business, and so forth.

They should begin with the question mentioned in the beginning of this section: What are the problems facing Niagara right now? (We might be pleasantly surprised to find that there are fewer serious problems than we sometimes think.) Then the group would move on to suggest some solutions to those problems. At this stage, nothing should be off-limits, including changes in service delivery.

This sounds utopian. There is a general view that people in Niagara are unable to agree on anything. This would an opportunity to prove the naysayers wrong.

Focus on the recognized problem areas of planning and economic development

There have been many attempts to develop a structure for the provision of economic development. None has proven totally satisfactory. The All-Niagara Summit might want to try to develop some arrangement or decide on a process that could result in a better arrangement. There is no easy solution to this issue, but it is important that Niagara continue to attempt to find methods for organizing this service.

Voluntary cooperation to improve service delivery

Local governments are close to one another, they deliver similar services, and they are not in competition with one another. This makes them prime candidates to work together in areas like procurement, equipment sharing and joint maintenance. For example, an MOU was recently announced between Welland, Thorold, Port Colborne, Pelham, and Wainfleet for joint purchasing of some goods. This is exactly the kind of thing that improves service delivery at minimal inconvenience and loss of autonomy. These kinds of initiatives should continue.

They aren't big and dramatic like amalgamation, but they can have a highly beneficial effect on service delivery (Daley and Spicer, 2018).

CONCLUSION

The ominous threat that was hanging in the air when the policy brief "Under the Knife & Under the Gun" was prepared, has passed. While there will be no forced amalgamation, there is still a real opportunity to address the perceived problems that exist and develop solutions to those problems. In our exhilaration at the passing of the gun and knife, we should not lose this opportunity to make less-radical changes.

REFERENCES

Daley, Kate, and Zachary Spicer. 2018. "Finding Common Ground: Interlocal Cooperation in Canada." University of Toronto, Institute on Municipal Finance & Governance.

Niagara communities sign MOU for joint purchasing, shared services, <https://www.municipalworld.com/press-releases/niagara-communities-sign-mou/> (Accessed, November 13, 2019).

About the author: David Siegel, PhD, is an emeritus professor of political science at Brock University who specializes in local government, public policy and administration.

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Contact Us:

Charles Conteh, PhD
Director, NCO, Brock University
cconteh@brocku.ca

Brock University

1812 Sir Isaac Brock Way
St. Catharines, ON, L2S 3A1 Canada

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