

Island Villages

Amalgamation – and the smallest, independent municipalities that have avoided it

Municipal amalgamation changed the makeup of Ontario. Although the process of restructuring and redrawing jurisdictional boundaries has recurrently taken place in Ontario for years, the “common sense revolution” of Conservative Premier Mike Harris (in office 1995-2002) resulted in many of the widespread and lasting municipal changes we see today. The revision of the *Municipal Act* in 2001, and other specialized legislation, enshrined these overhauls and set out the procedures for future amalgamations and annexations.

The goals of amalgamation were clear: efficiency, cost savings, and more coordination for economic development. Fifteen years later, the positive results have included some improvement in municipal services, lobbying efforts to the province, and better regional planning. But, as a number of academics have recently shown, the process has also resulted in a series of unintended drawbacks. Despite intentions to trim down government size and expenditures, Timothy Cobban, a political scientist from Western University, showed that municipal governments in Ontario have nearly doubled in size since 1999,

adding some 100,000 employees.¹ They are also spending more tax dollars. A study by the Fraser Institute illustrated the fact that amalgamation has largely failed to produce its intended cost savings. The study focused on three Ontario municipalities: Essex, Haldimand-Norfolk, and Kawartha Lakes. Each municipality incurred significant fiscal difficulties since amalgamation: Essex saw its per household parks and recreation costs more than double, Haldimand-Norfolk saw its long-term debt increase 111 percent, and Kawartha Lakes saw an increase of 52.8 percent in municipal employee compensation.²

The harmonization of wages and costs (as well as the price of the transition itself) has compounded to leave many municipalities deeper in long-term debt. Additionally, provincial downloading has seen many services and responsibilities sent downstream to municipalities over the past 15 years. Still, the most lasting and unfortunate impact of Ontario’s municipal restructuring program has been the loss of cultural identity across the province. Many local villages, towns, and cities saw the unique features of their communities fade away and their place names wiped off maps. Numerous communities also saw the concurrent blending of minor league sports teams, community programs, and even public schools. Such programs and activities play instrumental roles in the communal sense of place that residents feel within their native communities.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, municipal restructuring had very little support prior to implementation at the turn of the century.³ Scores of Ontarians, most notably in rural areas, resented the mergers and took to protesting amalgamation en masse. In

spite of this opposition, an overwhelming majority of Ontario municipalities were forced to incorporate as consolidated towns, townships, counties, cities, and regional municipalities. Geographically speaking, municipalities became much larger; acting more like regions and less like localized communities.

Interestingly, a number of small places in the province escaped the all-encompassing reach of the restructuring project. These communities remain autonomous, self-governing entities to this day. In Ontario, there are only 11 of these small “village” municipalities operating independently; they include: Westport, Oil Springs, Sundridge, Newbury, Thornloe, Casselman, Point Edward, Burk’s Falls, Hilton Beach, Merrickville-Wolford, and South River. Each of these lower-tier municipalities has its own unique historical and cultural narrative – and its own reasons for avoiding municipal mergers to remain independent.

The Village of Newbury (population 447) is one of these independent mini-communities. Newbury refused to merge with the Municipality of South-west Middlesex during the 1999-2001 amalgamation process – despite being geographically surrounded – and instead



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1 “Amalgamation brought fewer Ontario cities, but more city workers, report finds,” *Toronto Star*, January 13, 2014 <www.thestar.com/news/gta/2014/01/13/amalgamation_brought_fewer_ontario_cities_but_more_city_workers_report_finds.html>.

2 Zachary Spicer and Lydia Miljan, “Municipal amalgamation in Ontario,” The Fraser Institute report 2015 <www.fraserinstitute.org/sites/default/files/municipal-amalgamation-in-ontario-rev.pdf>.

3 Joseph Kushner and David Siegel, “Citizens’ Attitudes Towards Municipal Amalgamation in Three Ontario Municipalities,” *Canadian Journal of Regional Science*, 26:1 (2003).

incorporated as a solitary lower-tier municipality. Newbury has its own elected council, municipal services, by-laws, fire department, ambulance office, library, wastewater treatment plant, and community centre. According to the village motto, Newbury is “a full service community in the heart of Skunks Misery!”

Another interesting case study is the community of Point Edward (population 2,100). The village is located immediately adjacent to the City of Sarnia and still maintains its own police force and fire department. According to CAO Jim Burns:

*The feeling of elected officials and the community at the time of the amalgamation was that the village could do a better job of serving the residents than the City of Sarnia could. Point Edward is a tight-knit community and has been willing to pay a little extra to stay that way. As a [former] outsider that has now worked for the village for five years, I can tell you there is a much stronger feeling of community in Point Edward.*⁴

Nearby, the Village of Oil Springs avoided amalgamation for similar reasons. Former mayor Karen Hart shared that “Oil Springs decided, because of

our financial stability, that we could stand alone without being taken over by another municipality and use our reserves for the residents of Oil Springs, the people who built these funds.” Hart also noted that, when her council looked at the projected costs of the mergers, they couldn’t find any savings – but, they did see potential losses in services. She continued, “We also considered staff; would our staff be guaranteed jobs? When we asked this question to the other councils, they couldn’t guarantee jobs or seniority to our staff.”⁵

Other communities such as Burk’s Falls (population 967), Sundridge (population 985), and South River (population 1,100) have remained autonomous due to costs, employment tenure, and the distance found between neighbouring northern communities. Interestingly, very recently, each of these communities have reintroduced amalgamation as a future possibility.⁶ According to the clerk at the Village of South River, the downsides at the time of the mergers across the province “were economic, but also included the duplication of services and the creation of a council which was out of touch with a large territory and the concerns of people who live further away from the municipal office.” Additionally, she also noted that “at the time of amalgamation, the community was still predominantly third and fourth generations of the same families. There was a very strong resistance to doing away with well-established municipalities to create a new one.”⁷

Despite the intentions of efficiency, the research is clear: amalgamation did not reduce the size of municipal government, nor did it result in cost savings for all municipalities. Given these realities

(and the survival of these independent villages), could de-amalgamation be an answer for the communities across the province demanding institutional reform? Lydia Miljan and Zachary Spicer of the Fraser Institute assert that separation is indeed possible for many municipalities – though not always desirable. They point to two case studies in Winnipeg, Manitoba and Montreal, Quebec. Both of these cities have swallowed up smaller surrounding communities. In Manitoba, the Rural Municipality of Headingley managed to secede from Winnipeg, largely on the basis of its rural identity and its lack of connections to the urban centre – providing hope for separation advocates in the rural fringes of Ontario’s larger cities.⁸

Overall, the existence of these village communities raises a number of primary questions concerning amalgamation: was the 1999-2001 municipal restructuring program needed? Is life in these independent municipalities any better or worse than in similar communities that have been amalgamated? And, finally, do residents of those communities carry a stronger pride of place given the autonomy and continuity of their villages? Anecdotal evidence, such as the interviews conducted for this article, seem to suggest that village residents possess very strong ties to their communities. In an age when decentralized urbanization, technological advancement, and human transience have allowed us to avoid rooting ourselves in particular communities for long, these tiny, independent municipalities stand in stark contrast to such trends. They represent the distinctiveness of “the local” and the intimate connections that all of us desire with places and people. *MW*

4 Interview with Jim Burns, CAO of the Village of Point Edward, June 2016.

5 Interview with Karen Hart, former Mayor of the Village of Oil Springs, June 2016.

6 See, for example, Rob Learn, “Sundridge putting amalgamation on agenda,” *Almaguin News*, April 20, 2016 <www.northbaynipissing.com/news-story/6505742-sundridge-putting-amalgamation-on-agenda>.

7 Interview with Susan Arnold, Clerk-Administrator, the Village of South River, June 2016.

8 See note 2, *supra*.

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