

Township of Severn 2024-25 Ward Boundary Review Backgrounder

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 figure out 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. Severn’s Council is composed of seven members, two above the minimum size. When compared to other municipalities in Ontario, Severn’s Council is the same size as those elected in a number of bigger municipalities like Aurora (2021 census population of 62,057), Whitchurch-Stouffville (2021 census population of 49,864), Orangeville (2021 census population of 30,167), and Burlington (2021 census population of 186,948)¹ but is smaller than councils elected in some rural or smaller population municipalities like Gravenhurst (2021 census population of 13,157), North Perth (2021 census population of 15,538), and Muskoka Lakes (2021 census population of 7,652). See Figures Bi and Bii to compare Severn’s council composition to the other municipalities in Simcoe County and to selected municipalities in Ontario in the same population range.

¹ Population figures from Statistics Canada 2021 Census.



Figure Bi
Population and Council Members, Simcoe County Municipalities

Municipality	2021 Census Population	Area (sq. km)	Council Members*	Persons per Member	Wards/ At-Large
Township of Adjala-Tosorontio	10,989	371.53	7	1,570	Wards
Town of Bradford West Gwillimbury	42,880	200.68	9	4,764	Wards
Township of Clearview	14,814	556.37	9	1,646	Wards
Town of Collingwood	24,811	33.15	9	2,757	At-Large
Township of Essa	22,970	279.92	5	4,594	Wards
Town of Innisfil	43,326	262.39	9	4,814	Wards
Town of Midland	17,817	35.33	9	1,980	At-Large
Town of New Tecumseth	43,948	273.87	10	4,395	Wards
Township of Oro-Medonte	23,017	585.42	7	3,288	Wards
Town of Penetanguishene	10,077	25.42	9	1,120	At-Large
Township of Ramara	10,377	414.94	7	1,482	Wards
Township of Severn	14,576	523.06	7	2,082	Wards
Township of Springwater	21,701	535.85	7	3,100	Wards
Township of Tay	11,091	137.86	7	1,584	At-Large
Township of Tiny	12,966	335.05	5	2,593	At-Large
Town of Wasaga Beach	24,862	57.42	7	3,552	At-Large
Average	21,889	289.27	8	2,833	-

Source: Statistics Canada 2021 Census.

Note: Severn population does not include seasonal population. Seasonal population will be built in as part of the analysis.

* Includes the head of council.



Figure Bii
Population and Council Members, Comparable Ontario Municipalities

Municipality	2021 Census Population	Area (SqKm)	Council Members*	Persons per Member	Wards/ At-Large
Municipality of Thames Centre	13,980	434	5	2,796	3 Wards
City of Pembroke	14,364	14.32	7	2,052	At-Large (most votes= DM)
Municipality of West Nipissing	14,583	1,956	9	1,620	8 Wards
Township of St. Clair	14,659	618.6	7	2,094	2 Wards (3+2)
Town of Mississippi Mills	14,740	511.2	7	2,106	3 Wards (2+2+1)
** City of Kenora	14,967	211.7	7	2,138	At-Large
Township of West Lincoln	15,454	387	7	2,208	3 Wards
Municipality of North Perth	15,538	493.1	10	1,554	3 Wards (3+3+2)
Town of Saugeen Shores	15,908	170.2	9	1,768	6 Wards but DM & VDM at-large
Town of Bracebridge	17,305	615.2	9	1,923	5 wards + 3 at-large
Municipality of North Grenville	17,964	351.9	5	3,593	At-large (most votes= DM)
Town of Petawawa	18,160	164.7	7	2,594	At-large (most votes= DM)
Town of Pelham	18,192	126.3	7	2,599	3 Wards
Municipality of Middlesex Centre	18,928	588.10	7	2,704	Wards
Township of Russell	19,598	199.1	5	3,920	At-Large
Average	16,289	456.1	7	2,378	-

Source: Statistics Canada 2021 Census.

* Includes the head of council and some deputy mayors or upper-tier councillors elected at-large (e.g., Middlesex Centre, Bracebridge).

** Single tier; all others lower tier.



The present seven-member Severn Council is what might be called the default format; that is, it is the composition that has been in place since 1994. It is the status quo. Endorsing the continuation of a seven-member council, however, should be seen as an option available to the Township, just as much as would be a decision to elect a council of a different size.

The legislative authority to determine the number of councillors (*Municipal Act, 2001*, section 217) rests with the municipal council and is distinct from the determination of 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. In part, it will be driven by the personal preferences and commitment of individual councillors with a large element the result of the range of responsibilities that the municipality undertakes and the way it conducts its business. The amount of time spent on council business is not easily quantified but serving on council is not a “9-to-5” job. How much material must councillors review and understand before taking part effectively in council decision-making? How much constituency casework is directed to councillors? What committees, agencies, or other bodies do councillors take part in or chair? The size of the council has an impact on the amount of time individual councillors can give to such formal duties and to casework, in addition to their personal, family, and non-political obligations.

Responsiveness: The heart of “effective representation” (to be discussed more fully in relation to the guiding principles for a ward system – see Discussion Paper D) 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 ability of councillors to act as an intermediary between residents and the municipality.²

Logically, the larger the council, the more likely such connections can be supported since residents have more councillors to contact and there are more councillors to gather information across the relatively large geographic area of Severn. Conversely, the smaller the council, the greater the challenge to deliver such representation

² **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.



successfully. Although councillors are elected to serve the entire municipality – as reflected in the oath of office they take – at election time 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.

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.

Preliminary Insights into the Composition of Severn’s Council

In Discussion Paper C, three components of the present council structure are described: the mayor, the deputy mayor, and the ward councillors, adding up to a seven-member council. The most basic question to ask at the outset is, “is seven the right number?”

The Consultant Team’s working assumption is that seven members is the preferred size of Severn’s municipal Council. Through the various evaluative exercises that will be undertaken as part of the Ward Boundary Review, the Consultant Team may identify how alternative council compositions would align with the objectives of the review. An example of where composition may become a consideration is when the Consultant Team develops options for alternative ward boundaries.

A decision to change the size of Council would need to be followed by an assessment of the way Council operates as a decision-making body. This topic, however, is not within the scope of the Ward Boundary Review.



Topical Discussion Papers A to E

Discussion Papers will be available to residents, each addressing one of the topics to be considered in this review:

- Discussion Paper A – The Severn Electoral System
- *Discussion Paper B – What is the Optimal Size for a Municipal Council?*
- Discussion Paper C – The Component Parts of the Severn Council
- Discussion Paper D – Guiding Principles to Design Wards
- Discussion Paper E – Why a Ward Boundary Review?