

Policing services: municipalities still handcuffed

To the Editor,

Let's start with what has happened on policing costs for small rural municipalities in the past 10 years serviced by the OPP. The increases have been massive and in Hastings Highlands and Bancroft (both with about 4,000 permanent residents). We are now being charged about \$2.2 million per year...and our neighbours are in similar boats. It's a huge download of costs, but more importantly, municipalities have virtually no ability to influence the service, unlike the way it used to be some years ago. So it's funding accountability but with no responsibility for the service, performance, staffing, compensation, operating budget, etc. Just pay what we decide to charge you...

Now all indications are that many politicians know this is an unsustainable state. In fact, in Toronto they have started a major reform package to reduce policing costs, taking their cues from a successful effort in the U.K. But it is stalled by the police union which is not keen on many of the proposed changes.

And your current premier promised that the 2012 Auditor General's report, which was scathing in its indictment of many of the current operating practices of the OPP, would get an action plan. Still waiting for that.

In the meantime now we have more new bureaucracy in the administration of the Police Services Act that doesn't guarantee any more authority to local municipalities in defining their police services, although it does appear to give more authority to OPP management on what are and are not police responsibilities. But the OPP are not on side with this definition.

Small rural municipalities like ours can't leverage any real action to reform the governance of the OPP by themselves although they have put tremendous effort into the cost problem, most notably in Bancroft. But getting cell towers expunged from the OPP costing formula is tangential to the core problems of a service that is completely at odds with the general crime trend, good organizational principles and the ability of municipalities to link costs to services as the Auditor General made clear.

So they count on their lobby and advocacy organizations to make the case. But the Rural Ontario Municipal Association has been very inept at this and didn't even see it as a problem until 2016. And ROMA's parent organization, the Association of Municipalities of Ontario doesn't seem to have this issue on their radar at all. These are the folks that were in the group that designed the new firefighter certification.

No one will argue that we need first responder services in our municipalities. And this is not to say that our police, firefighters, or EMS providers are at fault here. Far from it.

Funding accountability with absolutely no ability to manage the service levels and operating conditions of the service provider is incredibly bad governance. That is what we currently have.

Full disclosure: I sent a draft of this letter (as is my normal practice) to six of our area mayors.

And got a response from one.

If they don't think this lack of any say in policing services is a problem for taxpayers, who is standing up for your concerns?

Think of it this way: if you were a retailer and bought your socks from a supplier who told you that you could not set the styles, colours, sizes, delivery dates, quantities, or cost and payment terms of the socks they sent you, would they be a supplier for long?

Didn't think so. But that is exactly what is happening with policing in Ontario municipalities that contract with the OPP.

And the recent firefighter proposal for volunteer departments like ours suggests the province is quite happy to keep expanding this approach of ?no say, just pay.?

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