

Small municipalities... between a rock and a hard place

By Jim Eadie

The past several years have witnessed a recurring theme on many different levels for small municipal governments. The province of Ontario sets the rules that govern the municipality's responsibilities, then send them the bill (or leave them with the bills) and let them figure out how to pay them. Additionally, the province sets the rules governing development, which can stifle or extinguish the only means of raising revenue the municipality has (property taxes) short of raising taxes. Setting standards that are meaningful for urban dwellers (most of Ontario's population) can often be irrelevant, if not outright harmful to small communities. A few examples:

Development: The official plan governs what, where, when and how land is used in Wollaston Township and elsewhere in the county. New changes are scheduled to prohibit any development on private roads. In Wollaston Township, half of property tax revenue comes from private road development. This is a remote area, not urban or rural where a good road (often paved) runs down almost every concession line. Our area depends primarily on resources, and recreation for economic development. To make matters worse, and illustrate the chasm of understanding, the county and province held a meeting in Coe Hill to explain the dangers of private roads, complete with slides of muddy roads with sharp curves, and a fire truck stuck in a ditch. It looked very much like our road system here, struggling with more extreme geography and climate than they might be familiar with in Kingston, or Belleville. ?We live here, because we want to live here, and we know what we got,? they were told by then Reeve Dan McCaw. Maintaining Wollaston's current road system is the largest single item in the budget, and building new roads is out of the question now ? unless of course the province wishes to help out.

Policing: The province sets the standards, negotiates the salaries, makes all of the administrative and operational decisions, and then sends out the bills. There is lots of discussion, and the local detachment commander makes the rounds of council meetings annually, but no negotiation. People in Orillia are responsible, apparently. Are the Policing standards (the number of police officers, vehicles, computers, equipment, training, operational standards and expectations, specialized services such as forensics, helicopter, search teams) relevant to this area, or even what rural/remote folks expect?

Conservation Authorities: A remarkably good idea, especially when the province first mandated them ? and incidentally, paid half of the cost. The province still by law requires that conservation authorities be retained one way or another, but pay a much smaller portion of the costs. The municipality has little choice beyond grumbling, but to pay the bill they receive.

Infrastructure grants from the province for small municipalities are another interesting study. The province defines small municipalities as less than 100,000 in population, which pits Wollaston against most small and medium size cities. In addition, the money is often provided for projects such as drinking water, wastewater and sewer, airports and sea port upgrades, four lane highways and other services not provided by small places like Wollaston.

Over half of the tax money collected by the municipality immediately is paid out to the County of Hastings levy, and to school board levees. Unpaid taxes come out of the municipality's budget. I have witnessed the lengthy line-by-line study of budgets, right down to the penny, at council meetings, and have come to conclude that even if I should disagree on exactly how taxes are spent, the process is open and accountable. My municipal taxes are the best ?bang for the buck?, and affect immediate everyday needs (roads, police, ambulance, waste, property standards, health, library, etc.).

Some social and community resources are provincially or otherwise funded in Belleville, with the expectation that a worker drives north every so often (in some cases hardly ever) or a limited satellite office is operated here. Meetings are held and decisions are made in Belleville where local northern citizens or agency representatives cannot keep driving to participate. Occasionally meetings are attempted in Bancroft resulting in poor attendance from the south, defeating the purpose.

Having worked in Belleville, and also in Bancroft during my career, I have noticed the remarkable ability here in our small communities to rally, do the right thing, get things done, make things different and better, help each other ? because that is the way it should be.

I like that spirit! That's one of the reasons I moved here.

That's what I think.