

What's the value of your vote?

To the Editor,

When Hastings Highlands was created out of the previous townships in 2000, the townships were simply combined and no attempt was made to address opportunities for improved municipal efficiency. So Toronto ended up with 45 councillors, and Hastings Highlands (HH) ended up with six plus a mayor and deputy mayor. Reorganization didn't happen. Many municipalities, regardless of size, have continued to operate as they did under amalgamation, when Harris took us from 815 to 445 municipalities in 2000.

In HH we have reduced the council by one member in 15 years. Toronto has made no attempt to reduce at all, but has had some colourful folks filling the chairs. Sadly, few of the 445 councils see the need or have the will to tackle the subject.

And the creation of the three wards out of the five old townships in HH also meant that the value of a vote (number of electors per ward) was unbalanced. A vote in Monteagle was worth twice what a vote was worth in Bangor, Wicklow and McClure. Herschel fell in between, closer to BWM than Monteagle.

Why does this matter?

Well at the provincial and federal level we have independent agencies that regulate the composition of electoral districts to try to be sure that a vote has roughly equal value in all constituencies. No such agency exists for municipalities. But if there is an imbalance, electors can ask the Ontario Municipal Board (OMB) to review the situation and bring the value of a vote into closer harmony.

There was a very well presented session recently on this subject led by the clerk of HH, Robyn Rogers.

The potential solutions range from a simple extraction of one councillor in Monteagle to a move from ward based councillors to where all electors would have an equal say in council (and an equal vote value). There are many options in between.

If there is one thing I learned as a human resource person it is that there is no clear best answer when it comes to organizing legislative work. There are lessons from experience particularly where contentious issues are involved; like quarries, dumps, sewage systems which no one wants in their ward.

Sometimes councillors have to make decisions that aren't popular with any constituents.

We are the dump capital of Ontario with nine dumps. Councillors would be more inclined to look for strategic solutions for all of HH, whereas councillors favour the status quo as there are dumps in each ward and no one wants their ward to be without a waste site. So the issue gets punted down the road and is unresolved 15 years later.

This not to say that ward councillors as we have today are incapable of making good decisions for the whole municipality. They are and do on many issues. But on some issues servicing the whole municipality effectively leads to very different decisions than servicing each ward.

I encourage you to get involved in this debate. It's your vote we are talking about. And I remind you that your vote at the municipal level counts for far more than at the provincial or federal level. It's a message that needs to be reinforced: you have more opportunity to influence the government at the municipal level than you will ever have at the provincial or federal level where your vote is one of 60,000 to 100,000 per riding.

Believe me: you can make a difference at the municipal level in HH.

Learn more on this subject. An educated constituent is a powerful force.

Bill Cheshire,

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