

Town of Lincoln 2024-25 Ward Boundary and Council Composition Review Background

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 determine 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. Lincoln’s Council is composed of nine members, four above the minimum size.

When compared to other municipalities across Niagara Region (Table Bi below), Lincoln’s council is of similar size to much of the Region. Nine councillors in the average across the Region, with only St. Catharine’s and Welland having more (13). Four municipalities have fewer than 9: Fort Erie (7), Pelham (7), West Lincoln (7) and Wainfleet (5). Municipalities with similar populations (Thorold and Grimsby) also have 9 councillors. This is not to imply that the size of council should not be reduced or increased, but rather to acknowledge that the size of Lincoln’s council is in line with much of the Region, including its direct comparator municipalities within the Region.



Table Bi: Population and Council Members across Niagara Region

Municipality	2021 Population	Composition of Council (Excl. Head of Council)	Population per Council Representative
St. Catharines	136,803	13	10,523
Niagara Falls	94,415	9	10,491
Welland	55,750	13	4,288
Fort Erie	32,901	7	4,700
Grimsby	28,883	9	3,209
Lincoln	25,719	9	2,226
Thorold	23,816	9	2,646
Port Colborne	20,003	9	2,226
Niagara-on-the-Lake	19,088	9	2,121
Pelham	18,192	7	2,599
West Lincoln	15,454	7	2,208
Wainfleet	6,887	5	1,377
Average	39,828	9	4,104

While other municipalities within the Niagara Region may be most familiar and the most useful comparators when comparing the size of Lincoln's council, it is useful to compare the municipality to those outside of the Region. Across Ontario, Woolwich, Clarence-Rockland and Wasaga Beach are of similar size and also part of two-tier systems. Of these, Woolwich has a council of 6 members (including the Head of Council), while Clarence-Rockland has 9 and Wasaga Beach has 7. All to say that across Ontario, Lincoln is not out of line with comparator municipalities, but there are a variety of electoral arrangements that suit municipalities of similar sizes.

Included within the governance framework of Lincoln is an elected Regional Councillor, who is not a member of local council and does not have a formal connection to council. This Councillor is elected at-large. The Regional Councillor may update council on regional matters, but this is not required. This practice has been used more frequently by some holders of this office in the past than others. The Mayor also sits on Regional



Council, meaning that only one member of local council formally sits on both local and Regional council.

The legislative authority to determine the number of local 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 typical job. How much material must councillors review and understand before participating effectively in council decision-making? How much constituency casework is directed to councillors? What committees, agencies, or other bodies do councillors participate in or chair? The size of the council has an impact on the amount of time individual councillors can allocate to such formal duties and to casework, as well as to their personal, family, and non-political obligations.

In Lincoln, ward councillors are considered to be “part time” and receive a yearly stipend of \$21,949. This means that each council member must have some additional source of income, which would naturally draw them into other duties aside from their role as a local councillor. As a result, the amount of additional duties councillors can take on outside of their formal role at council and committee meetings could be limited. As such, their ability to attend community events or respond to inquiries or calls for service from constituents would be naturally more constrained than someone in a “full-time” council role.

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 capacity of councillors to act as an intermediary between residents and the municipality.^[1]

Logically, the larger the council, the more likely such connections can be maintained since residents have more councillors to contact and there are more councillors to gather information across the relatively large geographic area of Lincoln. Conversely, the smaller the council, the greater the challenge to deliver such representation successfully. Although councillors are elected to serve the entire municipality – as reflected in the oath of office they take – at election time Local 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. Again, the “part-time” nature of the position may affect their responsiveness.

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.

Considering these three perspectives will provide insights for considering the optimal size of the municipal Council in Lincoln.

Preliminary Insights into the Composition of Lincoln’s Council

In Discussion Paper C, four components of Lincoln’s current governance structure are described: the mayor, the deputy mayor, local councillors and the regional councillor, adding up to a nine-member Council (as mentioned, the elected Regional Councillor does not sit as a member of Lincoln’s council). The most basic question to ask at the outset is, “is this the right number?”

Examining the composition of council is part of the mandate for the Consultant Team. Through the various evaluative exercises that will be undertaken as part of the Ward Boundary and Council Composition Review, the Consultant Team may identify how alternative council compositions would align with the objectives of the Review. While a council of 9 is in line with comparators in Niagara Region, this does not necessarily mean that it is optimal for the Town. In subsequent papers, the Consultant Team will delve further into this question, particularly in the final paper (Discussion Paper E) where population in each Ward will be examined, along with considering whether an at-

^[1] **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.



large system, single-member districts, an elected deputy mayor and “full-time” councillors would be better suited for Lincoln.

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 – Lincoln’s Electoral System
- *Discussion Paper B – What is the Optimal Size for a Municipal Council?*
- Discussion Paper C – The Component Parts of Lincoln’s Council
- Discussion Paper D – Guiding Principles to Design Wards
- Discussion Paper E – Is a Ward Boundary and Council Composition Review Necessary?