

Municipality of Port Hope 2025 Ward Boundary & Council Composition Review

Backgrounder

Discussion Paper D: The Method of Election for Councillors

“By general vote or wards.”

As observed in other Discussion Papers, the *Municipal Act, 2001* offers no guidance on key questions about what electoral system should be used in municipalities. In Ontario, there are straightforward choices available: should the municipality elect its councillors “by general vote or wards or by any combination of general vote and wards.”

- **General Vote (also called “At-Large”)**: Everyone in the whole town or city votes for all the councillors. It’s like one big group choosing all the leaders together.
- **Wards**: The town or city is split into smaller areas called “wards.” People in each ward vote for their own councillor to represent them.

Some places even mix both systems—using wards for some councillors and general vote for others.

What’s the Difference?

- In a **general vote**, all voters help choose every councillor. Everyone has the same choices.
- In a **ward system**, voters only choose the councillor for their own area. Each ward might have one councillor or more, depending on the size.

What Do Other Places Do?

There’s no one-size-fits-all rule. Some small towns use wards, and some big cities use general votes. For example:

- **Zorra** and **Georgian Bay** are small and use wards.
- **Cornwall**, **Niagara Falls**, and **Sarnia** are bigger and use general votes.
- **Thunder Bay** uses a mix of both.



Even in **Northumberland County**, most towns used general votes in the last election, but not all.

What About Port Hope?

Port Hope has used the **ward system** since 2001. That's the way things have been done for a long time. But just because it's familiar doesn't mean it's the best fit today.

There is no universally correct method for electing councillors. What matters most is choosing a system that works well for the community now—not just sticking with what's always been done.

Figure Di: Comparison of General Vote System and Ward System

A general vote system would be most appropriate if ...	A ward system would be most appropriate if ...
• The Municipality is (or should be) considered one political community. • Representatives are expected to prioritize the well-being of the entire municipality over that of just one ward. • Residents would have several representatives they could access for service or advocacy.	• The Municipality consists of unique political communities. • Councillors must be aware of how municipal-wide decisions affect communities within the Municipality. • Members of the public prefer to approach a councillor who has some connection to their neighbourhood or community. • Electors want clear choices.

There are also positive and negative implications that can be considered in deciding whether to keep a ward system or elect all council members by general vote.



Figure Dii: Implications of a Ward System of Representation

Advantages	Disadvantages
• Councillors are more likely to be genuine local representatives, connected to specific neighbourhoods within the Municipality, more easily accessible to residents, and knowledgeable about local issues. • Significant communities of interest are more likely to be represented. • It's less likely that a single perspective or sectional interest will dominate the Council. • Simplifies the election process for electors. • Voters can hold their representatives directly accountable for their decisions or performance while in office. • Lower campaign costs may encourage greater competition.	• Councillors may be elected based on minor issues and might not have a broad view of what is in the best interest of the Municipality as a whole. • Voters might face limited candidate options in ward elections. • There is a higher chance of acclamations. • If a councillor in a single-member ward is not performing effectively or is clashing with some electors, residents have no alternative councillor to approach. • Population changes can lead to unequal workloads for councillors until ward boundaries are reviewed. • Representatives may be narrowly focused on their own wards, rather than municipal-wide priorities.



Figure Diii: Implications of an At-Large System of Representation

Advantages	Disadvantages
• Electors have greater choice and flexibility in elections (each voter can consider every candidate in the council election). • Electors can select the candidates they think will do the best job, rather than having to make a choice among candidates who happen to run in their ward. • Residents will expect to have a larger number of councillors to approach with their concerns. • The system promotes the concept of a Municipality-wide focus, with councillors presumably being elected by, and concerned for, the Municipality as a whole, rather than placing a priority on more minor interests. • The likelihood of acclamations is reduced.	• There would be no designated voices for particular communities. Those elected could come from a single neighbourhood and lack familiarity with other parts of the community • At-large elections can lead to smaller or even significant communities of interest and points of view being under-represented (or not represented at all). • The system can lead to councillors being relatively inaccessible for residents of some parts of the Municipality (each Councillor has about 17,000+ constituents). • New candidates may be more successful than running in a ward where an incumbent is generally popular, or is popular with a dominant community of interest. • The format can lead to confusion of responsibilities and duplication of effort on the part of councillors (everybody on Council represents everybody in the municipality), but constituency workload may fall disproportionately on a few councillors. • Candidates who appeal to areas where voter turnout is highest tend to be elected disproportionately. • Large numbers of candidates on the ballot can be confusing for voters or can reduce voter turnout. • The resources needed to run a competitive campaign would be substantially more than in a ward-based election, potentially dissuading some from running. • Implications on weighted voting.

Even though some people in Port Hope like the idea of voting for councillors using a general vote (where everyone votes for all councillors), there are good reasons to keep the **ward system**. Here are three big ones:



1. **Port Hope is a big place:** It's hard for candidates to visit every neighbourhood during an election. Once elected, councillors must help over 17,000 people while working part-time.
2. **Different communities live here:** Port Hope has older neighbourhoods, newer ones, and a large rural area. If everyone voted together in a general vote, it's possible that all councillors would come from the town's busier, urban areas, leaving rural voices out.
3. **Fair representation matters:** Wards help ensure that every part of Port Hope has someone speaking up for it.

So, even though general voting sounds simple, the ward system helps make sure all areas—especially rural ones—are heard.

What Happens Next?

Right now, Port Hope uses wards, which is the starting point for this review. However, if many people say they want to switch to general voting during public consultations, the team will share that with the Council. If the community agrees to remove wards, then the next part of the review won't be needed. However, other decisions—like how many councillors there should be—will still need to be made.

If Port Hope keeps using wards, there are two things to think about:

1. **How many councillors should each ward have?**
2. **Should all wards have the same number of councillors?**

“District magnitude”: If a ward system is preferred for Port Hope, two interrelated themes must be considered: what are the benefits of multi-member wards, and what are the implications of the present system's “asymmetrical” nature (that is, wards that do not elect the same number of councillors)?

“Asymmetrical” Wards: Right now, Port Hope has **asymmetrical wards**—that means one ward elects **two councillors**, and the other elects **four**. This setup came from changes made by the province in the late 1990s when smaller towns were combined into bigger ones. Back then, they used old town boundaries to decide how many councillors each area got.

Sometimes, if one area has twice the population of another, it gets twice the seats. But in Port Hope, it's not clear if the current 4-to-2 split still matches the population today. That's something worth looking into.



Also, is it fair that some people get to vote for **four councillors** while others only vote for **two**? Should every ward have the same number of councillors? These are important questions.

Multi-member wards: The second aspect of district magnitude is Port Hope's multi-member wards, meaning more than one councillor represents each ward. This was done to avoid redrawing ward boundaries when towns were merged in 2001.

Some people like this system because:

- Councillors are part-time, so having more than one per ward helps share the work.
- Residents have more than one person to talk to if they need help.

But there are also challenges:

- One councillor might end up doing more work than the other.
- People might not know who to talk to, and both councillors might ask staff for help with the same issue.
- If councillors disagree, it could be hard to know which one truly speaks for the ward.

Another option is **single-member wards**, where each ward has just one councillor. This system is used in many places across Ontario and could be a good fit for Port Hope, too.

Responses to the issues addressed in this Discussion Paper are fundamental to the work to be undertaken by the Consultant Team to recommend a future electoral system in Port Hope.



Topical Discussion Papers A to F

Port Hope will release several Discussion Papers on its website to help residents understand the different topics being considered in this review:

- **Discussion Paper A:** Understanding The Current System
- **Discussion Paper B:** How Big Should Council Be?
- **Discussion Paper C:** The Component Parts of the Port Hope Council
- ***Discussion Paper D: The Method of Election for Councillors***
- **Discussion Paper E:** Guiding Principles to Design Wards
- **Discussion Paper F:** Why a Ward Boundary Review?

Your input is essential. These papers are here to inform and invite your feedback. Help shape the future of Port Hope's local government.