

Municipality of Port Hope 2025 Ward Boundary & Council Composition Review

Background

Discussion Paper B: How Big Should Council Be?

Context

Even though towns and cities in Ontario have had councils for a long time, there are no clear rules about how many people should be on a council. There's no formula, no standard, and no set schedule to check if the number of council members is still right. Every town is different, with its own history and way of doing things.

The law in Ontario (called the *Municipal Act*) says that a council must have **at least five members**, including a Mayor who is elected by everyone in the town. But it doesn't say what the maximum number should be, or how many councillors are best for a town of a certain size. This is different from school boards, which use a formula to decide how many trustees they need based on population.

Because of this, councils across Ontario come in all sizes. Port Hope's Council has **seven members**, which is more than the minimum. That's the same number as some bigger municipalities like Aurora and Burlington, but fewer than some smaller like Gravenhurst and North Perth.

See Figure Bi to compare Port Hope's council composition to the other municipalities in Northumberland County and Figure Bii to compare Port Hope's council composition to selected municipalities in Ontario in a comparable population range.

Port Hope has had a seven-member Council since 2001. This setup is called the "default" or "status quo," meaning it's what we've always had. But keeping seven members is just one option—Council could also choose to change the number if it makes sense for the community.



Figure Bi
Population and Council Members, Northumberland County

Municipality	2021 Population	Area (Sq. Km)	Council Members*	Persons per Member	Wards/ At-Large
Township of Alnwick/Haldimand	7,473	398.3	5	1,495	At-large
Municipality of Brighton	12,108	223.2	7	1,730	At-large
Town of Cobourg	20,519	22.4	7	2,931	At-large
Township of Cramahe	6,509	202.22	5	1,302	At-large
Township of Hamilton	11,059	256.03	5	2,212	At-large
Municipality of Port Hope	17,294	278.8	7	2,471	2 Wards (2 + 4)
Municipality of Trent Hills	13,861	513.85	7	1,980	5 Wards (5 x 1)
Average	12,689	270.7	6	2,017	-

Source: Census Profile, 2021 Census of Population.

*Includes the Head of Council and a Deputy Mayor elected at-large except for Hamilton and Port Hope where the Deputy Mayor is appointed by the council from among its members.

Figure Bii
Population and Council Members, Other Ontario Area Municipalities
(Population 15,000 to 20,000)

Municipality	2021 Population	Area (Sq. Km)	Council Members*	Persons per Member	Wards/ At-Large
Municipality of Thames Centre	13,980	434.0	5	2,796	3 Wards
City of Pembroke	14,364	14.32	7	2,052	At-Large
City of Kenora **	14,967	211.7	7	2,138	At-Large
Township of St. Clair	14,659	618.6	7	2,094	2 Wards (3+2)
Township of Severn	14,576	523.1	7	2,082	5 Wards
Town of Mississippi Mills	14,740	511.2	7	2,106	3 Wards (2+2+1)



Municipality	2021 Population	Area (Sq. Km)	Council Members*	Persons per Member	Wards/ At-Large
Township of Clearview	14,814	556.4	7	2,116	5 Wards
Municipality of West Nipissing	14,583	1,956	9	1,620	8 Wards
Township of West Lincoln	15,454	387.0	7	2,208	3 Wards
Municipality of North Perth	15,538	493.1	10	1,554	3 Wards (3+3+2)
Town of Saugeen Shores	15,908	170.2	9	1,768	6 Wards
Town of Bracebridge	17,305	615.2	9	1,923	5 wards + 3 at-large
Town of Midland	17,817	35.33	9	1,980	At-large
Town of Petawawa	18,160	164.7	7	2,594	At-large
Municipality of North Grenville	17,964	351.9	5	3,593	At-large
Town of Pelham***	18,192	126.3	7	2,599	3 Wards
Average	15,814	448.1	7.4	2,201	-

Source: Census Profile, 2021 Census of Population.

* Includes the Head of Council and some directly elected Deputy Mayors implicit in the composition of Council (Thames Centre, St. Clair, Severn, Mississippi Mills, Clearview, West Lincoln, North Perth, and Midland). In Pembroke, Petawawa, and North Grenville, the at-large councillor with the most votes serves as the Deputy Mayor. The Town of Saugeen Shores elects both a Deputy Mayor and vice-deputy at-large.

** Single tier; all others are lower tier.

*** A Regional Councillor is also elected in Pelham who does not sit on Town Council.

Who Decides How Big Council Should Be?

The law in Ontario says that each town or city can decide how many councillors it wants. This decision is separate from how councillors are elected. In Port Hope, the big question is:

Is having seven Council members still the right choice for a town with over 17,000 people—and growing?



What Makes a Good Council Size?

There's no perfect number, but we can think about three important things:

Effective Political Management: Council members help run the town. They read reports, attend meetings, assist residents, and serve on committees. Some councillors do more than others, depending on their interests and how the town operates. Being a councillor isn't a 9-to-5 job, it requires time and effort. If there are more councillors, the workload can be shared more evenly.

Responsiveness: The core of "effective representation" (to be discussed more fully regarding the guiding principles for a ward system – see Discussion Paper E) is the belief that councillors must be able to stay in contact with their constituents, mainly – but not only – those who live in the electoral district where the local councillor is elected. Councillors should be easy for residents to contact. If there are more councillors, residents have more options for who to reach out to. Port Hope is a large area, so having more councillors can help ensure everyone's voice is heard. Although councillors are elected in wards (parts of town), they are meant to serve the entire community.

Accountability: Municipal councillors are not only "political managers" of the municipal corporation but also hold responsibility for their decisions through elections. A democratic electoral system should offer voters a sufficient range of opportunities to choose municipal representatives: if, as the saying goes, municipal government is "closest to the people," the number of representatives subject to public accountability for their actions is a key indicator of how connected or distant the council is from the community.

In Port Hope, each ward has more than one councillor, which can make it harder to know who is responsible for what. Discussion Paper C will examine this more thoroughly.

Considering these three perspectives can help decide if seven councillors is still the best number.

Preliminary Insights into the Composition of Port Hope's Council

In Discussion Paper C, three components of the present council structure are described: the mayor, the deputy mayor and the ward councillors, adding up to a seven-member Council. The most basic question to ask at the outset is, "is seven the right number?"

The Consultant Team's working assumption is that seven members is the preferred size of Port Hope's municipal council, if only because it has been the composition of council throughout the life of the present municipality. Through the various evaluative exercises that will be undertaken as part of the Ward Boundary and Council Composition Review,



however, the Consultant Team may identify alternative council compositions that would better align with the objectives of the Review as it develops options for a revised ward system.

If the Council size changes, the town would also need to examine how the Council works, like how many committees there are and what each councillor is responsible for. That part won't be covered in this review, but it's something to think about later.

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.