



Municipality of Port Hope

Staff Report

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Report Title: Ward Boundary and Council Composition Review Update and Potential Next Steps

Report to: Council

Date of meeting: February 17, 2026

Report Author:

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Department responsible:

Legal & Legislative Services

Report Number: LLS-06-26

Recommended Motion:

That Council defer the Ward Boundary and Council Composition Review until the County of Northumberland's updated growth forecasts are finalized as noted in Option 3 to Report LLS-06-26; and further

That staff be directed to bring forward a revised budget estimate for a Ward Boundary and Council Composition Review within 24 months of the commencement of the next Council term, with the objective of completing the review in advance of the 2030 Municipal election.

Highlights:

- New and material information has emerged since the Ward Boundary and Council Composition Review was initiated, including updated growth forecasting work underway by the County of Northumberland and increased clarity regarding potential new nuclear project in Wesleyville.
- Updated growth projections may materially affect future population distribution and long-term growth assumptions, which are foundational to any defensible ward boundary configuration.
- Council raised concerns at the Special Council Meeting (November 4 and December 5, 2025) regarding the need to ensure that growth projections and major development impacts are appropriately reflected in the review; this report responds directly to those concerns.
- Council is being asked to consider this new information prior to proceeding further with the review, recognizing the legislative, financial, and governance implications of each available option.

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- This report presents clear options for Council's consideration, including continuing the review as planned, completing the review with a subsequent population reassessment, or deferring the review until updated growth forecasts are available.

Background:

The Municipality of Port Hope was established in 2001 through the amalgamation of the former Town of Port Hope and the Township of Hope. At that time, it was determined that Council would be composed of a Mayor and six Councillors, elected to represent two wards – Ward 1 (urban) and Ward 2 (rural). At that time, it was also established that Ward 1 would be represented by four Councillors and Ward 2 by two Councillors.

In May 2025, Council directed staff to engage Watson & Associated Economists Ltd. (“the Consultant Team”) through a Notice of Motion to undertake a Ward Boundary and Council Composition Review (WBCCR), including a review of the Deputy Mayor’s role, with the objective of ensuring the Municipality’s governance structure remains representative and effective. Council also directed the Consultant Team to ensure that its methodology and process was upheld, with the final recommendations presented to Council no later than September 30, 2026.

On November 4, 2025, and again on December 5, 2025, the Consultant Team presented an interim update and report to Council outlining preliminary research findings and initial observations on potential ward boundary and Council composition options. These preliminary options were informed by background research, population and growth data, legislative requirements, and feedback received through the first round of community engagement.

During the Special Council meetings at which the interim report was presented, Council engaged in extensive discussion and posed a significant number of questions to the Consultant Team. These questions addressed, among other matters, the study methodology, the research and data sources relied upon, the principles guiding the development of alternative ward boundary options, community engagement processes, and population trends within the Municipality. A key area of discussion was the potential impact of the proposed Wesleyville nuclear project in Port Hope, including how related growth pressures could affect future population distribution and, consequently, ward boundary considerations.

Following this discussion, Council resolved to receive the interim report for information. As such, staff and the Consultant Team have continued with the review process. This includes proceeding with the next phase of work, namely a second round of community engagement focused on presenting and gathering feedback on the alternative ward boundary options developed by the Consultant Team. As part of this phase, the Consultant Team has undertaken further analysis and refinement of population projections, including discussions with municipal staff regarding anticipated growth, including growth potentially associated with the Wesleyville nuclear project. Staff have also engaged with County of Northumberland regarding anticipated growth projections related to the potential expansion associated with the Wesleyville nuclear project.

Discussion:

Through recent discussions with the County of Northumberland, staff have been advised that the County is currently undertaking an update to its growth forecasts. While the anticipated timeline for completion is approximately six to eight months, this timeline remains tentative and the forecasts may be finalized earlier or later than that date. This development is material to the Municipality's ongoing WBCCR, as updated growth projections could have a direct and substantive impact on population distribution, long-term growth assumptions, and, by extension, the appropriateness of any ward boundary configuration ultimately adopted by Council.

Staff are bringing this matter forward for Council's consideration in light of the concerns raised during the Special Council Meeting at which the Consultant Team presented the interim report. At that meeting, Council emphasized the importance of ensuring that growth projections, particularly those associated with major potential developments, are adequately reflected in any ward boundary review. Since that time, additional information has emerged, including the release of the initial project description for the proposed new nuclear development at Wesleyville and confirmation of the County's growth forecast update work. This information was not available when the Notice of Motion initiating the review was passed in May 2025 and represents a significant change in context.

A ward boundary review is a legislatively prescribed and highly scrutinized process. It carries statutory notice, public engagement, and appeal mechanisms, and must be supported by a transparent, defensible methodology grounded in reliable population data and growth assumptions. The Consultant Team has adhered to these requirements to date and has applied a clear and consistent methodology that would remain defensible if the project were completed as currently scoped.

However, the emergence of updated growth forecasts introduces a level of uncertainty that warrants careful consideration. Should Council make a final decision on ward boundaries prior to the release of revised growth projections, there is a risk that the adopted structure may require reconsideration within a relatively short time frame. In particular, if the updated forecasts (including potential impacts associated with the Wesleyville nuclear project) demonstrate materially different growth patterns than those currently assumed, Council could be faced with the need to revisit ward boundaries within the next one to two Council terms. This could undermine both public confidence in the process and the long-term stability of the governance structure.

Staff acknowledge that a significant investment of both staff and consultant resources has already been made. The project is nearing completion, with only the second phase of community engagement and the final report and recommendations outstanding. This investment is an important consideration and underscores the need to carefully weigh next steps.

That said, Council's decision should not be based solely on incurred costs. It must also consider the long-term value to the community, the integrity and durability of the outcome, and the likelihood that the resulting ward structure will remain relevant and equitable over time. While some foundational work such as discussion papers, data analysis, and methodological framing, would be reusable in a future review, proceeding

to completion at this time may not deliver the most informed or enduring outcome given the current uncertainty while continuing to incur expense.

Options for Council Consideration

Option 1 – Continue to Completion:

At present, staff have not received direction to pause or defer the review and will continue to advance the project in accordance with Council's existing direction. Under this approach, the second round of public engagement and the final consultant report would be completed and brought forward in approximately Q2 2026, prior to the deadline provided in the Notice of Motion. At that time, Council would retain full discretion to adopt a preferred ward configuration, select an alternative option presented, or receive the report for information without making a final determination.

Option 2 – Continue to Completion and Complete a Population Review within 24 Months:

Alternatively, Council may choose to complete the review and adopt a ward structure now, with the intention of undertaking a population and boundary review within approximately 24 months once updated growth forecasts are available. While this approach preserves momentum, it carries the risk that materially different growth assumptions could necessitate a more comprehensive review in any event, potentially resulting in duplicated effort and public fatigue. After conferring with the Consultant Team on this option, staff note that this option would incur approximately an additional \$20,000 in cost.

Option 3 – Deferral of Project until Growth Forecasting is Complete (Staff Recommended Approach):

Staff recommend that Council defer the WBCCR until the County's updated growth forecasts are finalized and there is greater clarity regarding the timing and scale of the proposed Wesleyville nuclear project. Deferral would allow a future review to be informed by the most current and comprehensive population data available, thereby strengthening the defensibility, relevance, and longevity of any resulting ward structure.

While deferral would require the community engagement process to be reinitiated at a later date, staff note that the overall cost of a future review would likely be lower than the current process, as foundational analytical work has already been completed. Importantly, a renewed review would occur under a new Council, supported by updated growth data, ensuring that elected officials are making decisions based on the best available information. Staff note that a reinitiated Ward Boundary and Council Composition Review would incur approximately \$65,000, with the understanding that staff would need to account for billing increases, changes in staff positions, and whether the new Council requires additional or different information.

It is also important to note that any changes to ward boundaries or council composition would not take effect until the 2030 municipal election. This provides sufficient time for Council to pause, reassess, and bring forward a comprehensive and well-informed review within the first 24 months of the next Council term, should deferral be approved.

Given the current uncertainty surrounding growth projections and major potential developments, staff have concluded that deferring the WBCCR represents the most prudent and responsible course of action. This approach prioritizes process integrity, long-term community value, and informed decision-making over expediency. Staff therefore recommend that Council defer the current review and direct staff to bring forward a ward boundary and council composition review as a future budget item within 24 months of the next Council term for Council's consideration.

Should Council endorse this approach, staff would return to Council within 24 months of the commencement of the next Council term with a revised budget estimate for the Ward Boundary and Council Composition Review. This would allow Council to consider and approve the necessary funding and scope in a timely manner, ensuring that the review is completed with sufficient opportunity for public engagement, Council deliberation, and any required appeal processes, well in advance of the 2030 municipal election.

Financial Considerations:

In accordance with the Notice of Motion directing staff to complete the Ward Boundary and Council Composition Review, a total of \$57,000 has been expended to date from the Growth Readiness Funds to support consultant services, technical analysis, and project management associated with the review. These expenditures represent incurred costs and will not be recoverable, regardless of Council's ultimate decision on how to proceed.

Should Council select Option 1 or Option 2, the full approved project budget of \$80,000 would be expended, consistent with the original scope and funding authorization set out in the Notice of Motion. Under Option 2, while the review would be completed and a ward boundary configuration adopted, there would likely be an additional, smaller future cost of approximately \$20,000 to undertake a population review within approximately 24 months, in order to assess updated growth forecasts and confirm whether the adopted ward boundary configuration remains appropriate or requires adjustment.

Should Council select Option 3 (deferral of the review), no additional costs would be incurred at this time beyond those already spent. Staff would instead bring forward a revised budget estimate of approximately \$65,000 for Council's consideration within 24 months of the commencement of the next Council term to reinitiate the Ward Boundary and Council Composition Review, informed by updated growth forecasts and project assumptions. This approach would allow Council to assess the appropriate scope, timing, and funding requirements of a future review in the context of the most current information available.

Communication and Public Engagement:

Subject to Council's decision and the selected option, staff will implement an appropriate communications approach to ensure transparency and public awareness regarding the outcome of the WBCCR and the associated next steps. This will include the issuance of a media release, as well as the use of the Municipality's regular communication channels, such as the municipal website and social media platforms.

Staff will make best efforts to ensure residents are informed in a timely and accessible manner and understand how and when further participation may occur.

Conclusion:

The Ward Boundary and Council Composition Review represents an important governance exercise with long-term implications for representation and electoral fairness. Staff recognize that this is not an easy decision, particularly given the work completed to date and the resources already invested. However, new and material information has emerged since the initiation of the review, including updated growth forecasting work underway at the County level and increased clarity regarding potential major development in the community. In light of these developments, staff believe it is essential that Council be fully informed of the current context and consider next steps based on the most complete and accurate information available at this time. Staff have therefore brought forward the options outlined in this report to support Council's deliberations and enable an informed and transparent decision.

Attachments:

None.