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. Barrie's Council is composed of 11 members, 6 above the minimum size.

When compared to other municipalities of comparable size (Figure Bi below), Barrie's council (11 members) is in line with the average of 10.5. Each council member in Barrie represents approximately 13,439 residents on average, below the average constituents per member across the remaining municipalities. None of the municipalities in this group employ an at-large electoral system.

Figure Bi
Population and Council Members across Comparable Ontario Municipalities

Municipality	2021 Population	Area (sq. km)	Council Members*	Persons per Member	Wards/ At-Large
Burlington	186,948	186.12	7	26,707	Wards
Greater Sudbury	166,004	3186.26	13	12,770	Wards
Barrie	147,829	99.01	11	13,439	Wards
Guelph	143,740	87.43	13	11,057	Wards
Cambridge	138,479	112.99	9	15,387	Wards
St. Catharines	136,803	96.2	13	10,523	Wards
Kingston	132,485	451.58	13	10,191	Wards
Ajax	126,666	66.64	7	18,095	Wards
Waterloo	121,436	64.06	8	15,180	Wards
Average	**147,577**	**449.601**	**10.5**	**14,929**	-

* Includes the head of council.

The present 10-ward system (with 11 members total, including the mayor who is elected at-large) has been in place since 1982. It is the status quo and familiar to the residents of Barrie. As shown above, it is a size that is in line with municipalities of comparable populations across Ontario. Endorsing the continuation of this model with the current number of wards, however, should be seen as an option available to the City, just as much as would be a decision to elect a council of a different size.

The legislative authority to determine the number of 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 "9-to-5" 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.

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 Barrie. 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 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.

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 Barrie.

[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.

Preliminary Insights into the Composition of Barrie's Council

The Consultant Team's working assumption is that 11 members is the preferred size of Barrie's City Council. Through the various evaluative exercises that will be undertaken as part of the Ward Boundary Review, the Consultant Team may identify how alternative council compositions would align with the objectives of the Review. Given, however, that the size of Council is largely in line with municipalities of comparable size, it appears the number of council members will not require adjustment.

A decision to change the size of Council would need to be followed by an assessment of the way Council operates as a decision-making body. This topic, however, is not within the scope of the Ward Boundary Review. This study, therefore, will focus on the structure of the ward boundaries, but if a determination is made by the Consultant Team that the system would function better with a different number of council members, we will make this information known to both staff and council.

Topical Discussion Papers A to D

Discussion Papers will be available to residents, each addressing one of the topics to be considered in this review:

- Discussion Paper A – Barrie's Electoral System
- *Discussion Paper B – What is the Optimal Size for a Municipal Council?*
- Discussion Paper C – Guiding Principles to Design Wards
- Discussion Paper D – Why a Ward Boundary Review?