Loyalist Township
Council Composition and
Ward Boundary Review 2024-25
Backgrounder

Discussion Paper D:
The Method of Election for Councillors

As observed in other Discussion Papers, the *Municipal Act, 2001* offers no guidance on key questions about what electoral system should be used in particular 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?"

The distinction between the two systems is fairly simple. In one system, referred to as a "general vote" system in the *Municipal Act, 2001* (or as an "at-large" system in popular terminology), the municipality is a single electoral district that includes all seats filled by councillors. In other words, the entire municipality can be considered a "multi-member" electoral district. In the other system (a ward system), the municipality is divided into a specified number of electoral districts that elect representatives in separate contests. Within this arrangement, the "district magnitude" (that is, the number of seats to be elected in each district) may vary from one (a "single-member" ward) to some larger number (a "multi-member" ward), or in a few cases (such as Loyalist Township) the number of seats varies from ward to ward.

There is no consistency across Ontario municipalities in the use of the two systems: some municipalities with small populations use wards such as the Townships of Zorra (8,000) and Georgian Bay (2,300), while some municipalities with larger populations such as Cornwall (48,000), Niagara Falls (85,000), and Sarnia (75,000) do not. A handful use a combined ward-general vote system to elect councillors (most notably Thunder Bay[1]) as permitted under the *Municipal Act, 2001*. There is also no conventional benchmark (such as population or geographic size) to apply to indicate when or whether a change from one system to another is appropriate.

A ward system is the status quo in Loyalist Township – the "default solution" – that was originally adopted as part of the 1998 transition from previously separate component parts into the new municipality. As suggested in reference to other parts of the

[1] Note that the Thunder Bay combination applies to electing councillors, whereas in Loyalist Township a ward system is used to elect councillors but the at-large option is presently used to elect the separate office of deputy mayor. See also Discussion Paper C.

municipal electoral system, maintaining a ward system requires a rationale rather than simply being accepted because it is familiar.

The Consultant Team would not claim that there is a definitively "better" system as such. Rather, the method used to elect councillors should fit the contemporary municipality in question. For example:

A general vote system would be most appropriate if ...	A ward system would be most appropriate if ...
• the Township is (or should be) considered one political community. • councillors are expected to place greater emphasis on the well-being of the entire Township ahead of the well-being of its particular parts. • members of the public are prepared to approach any councillor for assistance. • electors want more choices.	• the Township is composed of a number of distinctive political communities. • councillors need to be mindful of the impact of municipal-wide decisions on particular communities within the Township. • members of the public prefer to approach a councillor who has some connection to their neighbourhood or community. • electors want clear choices.

As well, there are positive and negative implications that can be considered in deciding whether to keep a ward system or to elect all members of council by general vote.

Implications of a Ward System of Representation

Advantages	Disadvantages
• Councillors are more likely to be truly local representatives, easily accessible to residents and aware of local issues. • Significant communities of interest are more likely to be represented. • It is less likely that one particular point of view or sectional interest will dominate the council. • Wards may provide more cost-efficient government, primarily by eliminating duplication of administrative work communicating the same	• Councillors may be elected on minor or parochial issues and may lack a perspective of what is to the benefit of the Township as a whole. • Voters may have a restricted choice of candidates in elections for individual wards. • There is a greater likelihood of acclamations. • There may be problems if a councillor is not performing effectively or is clashing with some electors, since electors in a single-

Advantages	Disadvantages
information to and from all councillors. • Voting in a ward simplifies the election process for electors.	member ward have no alternative (knowledgeable) councillor to approach. • Ward boundaries may be susceptible to change caused by demographic shifts. • Population changes can lead to unequal workloads for councillors until ward boundaries are reviewed. • A general vote system may discourage new candidates if an incumbent is generally popular or if an incumbent who is popular with a dominant community of interest is running.

Implications of an At-Large System of Representation

Advantages	Disadvantages
• Electors have greater choice and flexibility in elections (each voter has the opportunity to consider every candidate in the council election). • Electors are able to 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 have a larger number of councillors to approach with their concerns. • The system promotes the concept of a Township-wide focus, with councillors being elected by, and concerned for, the Township as a whole, rather than placing a priority on more parochial interests.	• There would be no designated voices for particular communities. • At-large elections can lead to 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 Township (each councillor has about 18,000 constituents). • 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. • Candidates must campaign across the entire Township; this may make the cost of a campaign

Advantages	Disadvantages
• The likelihood of acclamations is reduced.	prohibitive (especially for newcomers). • 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).

Despite the attractiveness of a general vote system to some residents in Loyalist Township, the case for retaining a ward system is strong and can be made in relation to at least three main themes: the geographic size of the municipality, the presence of several discrete population centres, and the need to ensure representation for the rural and island community. Observations drawn from the Consultant Team's research include the following:

- Loyalist Township is a large geographic area; it is an unreasonable expectation that all candidates would have to canvas the entire municipality during an election and then for part-time councillors to successfully represent all 18,000 residents over a four-year term of office.
- There are several distinctive communities and settlement areas in Loyalist Township; some are well-established and close knit while others are newer and are bringing demographic changes to the Township.
- Residents need fair representation at the Council table especially in light of forecasted population growth and intensification in a few locations within the Township.

As noted earlier, a ward system is the "default" arrangement in Loyalist Township and can be justified for the reasons just presented. The Consultant Team is prepared to move forward with this review on that basis.

Of course, if the alternative of dissolving the wards to elect councillors is widely supported in the public consultations, the Consultant Team would share that information along with the reasons why residents support it. The second phase of the electoral review would not be necessary if there are to be no wards in 2026 and beyond, although decisions related to the composition of council already raised in this and other papers (see Discussion Papers B and C) would still need to be settled.

Topical Discussion Papers A to F

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

- Discussion Paper A – The Loyalist Electoral System
- Discussion Paper B – What is the Optimal Size for a Municipal Council?
- Discussion Paper C – The Component Parts of the Loyalist Township Council
- Discussion Paper D – The Method of Election for Councillors
- Discussion Paper E – Guiding Principles to Design Wards
- Discussion Paper F – Is a Ward Boundary Review Necessary?