



**Subject: Council Composition and Ward Boundary Review – Final Report**

**To: Council**

**From: Legislative Services Department**

Report Number: 2025-137

Meeting Date: June 24, 2025

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### **Recommendation:**

That Legislative Services Department Report 2025-137 be received; and

That Council approve Option \_\_\_\_ from the 2024/2025 Council Composition and Ward Boundary Review - Final Report prepared by Watson & Associates Economists Ltd., attached as Appendix A, as the council composition and ward boundaries for the City of Port Colborne, to be in effect for the 2026 Municipal Election; and

That the City Clerk be directed to bring forward a by-law reflecting the approved ward boundary option to the next regularly scheduled meeting of Council, being a by-law to provide for the alteration of the ward boundaries for the City of Port Colborne.

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### **Purpose:**

The purpose of this report is to present Council with the final recommendations report, prepared by Watson & Associates Economists Ltd. ("Watson & Associates"), attached as Appendix A, and to seek Council's approval of a council composition and ward boundaries option, with the boundaries to take effect for the 2026 municipal election.

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### **Background:**

#### **Council Composition:**

Section 217 of the *Municipal Act* ("the Act") sets out the requirements of the composition of municipal councils in Ontario stating that members of a municipal council (other than the Mayor) "shall be elected by general vote or wards or by any combination of general vote and wards" (Municipal Act, 2001 s. 217 (1) 4). Section 217 of the Act also

authorizes a local municipality “to change the composition of its council” subject to five enumerated rules, the most relevant of which is: “There shall be a minimum of five members, one of whom shall be the head of council.” A by-law adopted by Council to implement this authority is not open to appeal to the Ontario Land Tribunal (OLT).

### **Ward Boundaries:**

In Ontario, the Act provides the framework within which municipalities may conduct ward boundary reviews. Section 222 of the Act provides Council with the power to divide or re-divide the municipality into wards, or dissolve any existing wards provided such actions are enacted through by-law. A by-law adopted by council to implement this authority must be in place before January 1 of an election year and is subject to appeal to the OLT.

### **Port Colborne Review**

The City of Port Colborne’s current ward boundary system consists of four wards with two members of Council being elected from each Ward, making up a total Council composition of nine members (eight councillors and the mayor).

The population size of each ward as well as a perceived variance in a ward-to-ward comparison has been brought to the attention of Council on several occasions and as a result reviews have been conducted by staff, Council, and electoral review committees. Reviews occurred in 2005, 2009, 2013, and 2014 resulting in changes to Ward 2 and 4 boundaries in 2009. Each of these reviews were conducted by citizens and/or councillors of the municipality. An independent review was not conducted during any of the reviews mentioned.

The last ward boundary review in the City of Port Colborne happened before the 2014 municipal election. The results of the 2014 ward boundary review were presented to Council at its regular meeting on June 10, 2013, by way of Report 2013-15. Council decided to refer Report 2013-15 to a Special Meeting on July 3, 2013, where Council resolved to maintain the City’s current electoral system and the current composition of City Council.

A municipality should typically undertake a review of its ward boundaries every three to four election cycles to ensure the electoral system represents the principles of effective representation. Port Colborne did not initiate a ward boundary review before the 2018 or 2022 municipal elections. Council approved the Council Composition and Ward Boundary Review via the 2023 budget as well as the subsequent increased budget request on April 9, 2024. Watson & Associates were selected as the consultants to conduct the review and the project began in the spring of 2024.

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## **Discussion:**

### **Why Conduct a Ward Boundary Review:**

A question often asked is why undertake a ward boundary review. Conducting such a review is widely regarded as best practice that promotes fair and effective local representation. As populations shift and communities evolve, ward composition, including, but not limited to, population size can become imbalanced, potentially leading to unequal representation on Council. A ward boundary review ensures that balance is maintained. It also provides an opportunity to reflect changes in community identity, neighbourhood development, and demographic trends. By considering both current realities and future growth, the review helps ensure that ward boundaries remain relevant, equitable, and responsive over time. A transparent, well-structured review process also reinforces public confidence in the integrity of local governance and aligns with legislative requirements and good governance principles. Ultimately, a ward boundary review supports equitable representation and more effective decision-making at the Council table.

### **Final Report**

This report seeks Council's approval of one of the options outlined in the Final Report for the Council Composition and Ward Boundary Review, prepared by Watson & Associates, attached as Appendix A. Watson & Associates will be in attendance at the Council meeting on June 24<sup>th</sup> to provide a presentation regarding their final report. Council is asked to consider the following options in response to the consultant's findings:

- Adopt one of the two final options presented and enact a by-law at a future Council meeting to implement the proposed ward boundary adjustments. Although the resulting by-law may be subject to appeal to the OLT, the Consultant Team is confident that either option would withstand scrutiny under the principles of effective representation.
  - Final Option 1: Four wards with two Councillors per ward (total of eight Councillors)
  - Final Option 2: Three wards with two Councillors per ward (total of six Councillors)
- Take no action, thereby maintaining the current ward structure of four wards with two Councillors per ward (total of eight Councillors). This approach would indicate Council's view that the existing system remains appropriate for the City's current and projected future growth. However, it is important to note that Watson & Associates has recommended changes to ward boundaries based on their comprehensive analysis.

Should Council decide to adopt changes to ward boundaries, work will begin to finalize the new ward boundaries. Notification of these changes will be provided to the Niagara

Regional Clerk, Local Area Municipalities and Elections Ontario, which now holds the legislated responsibility for preparing the Preliminary List of Electors for municipal elections. The City Clerk will collaborate with staff and agencies to develop a communication plan to inform residents about the new ward boundaries leading up to the 2026 municipal election.

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### **Internal Consultations:**

The review has involved collaboration across multiple City departments including Legislative Services, Communications and Planning as well as the Office of the CAO. Once Phase 1 of the review officially kicked off, Watson & Associates conducted a series of interviews with Mayor, Members of Council, and senior City staff virtually and in-person. In May 2025, a second set of workshops were held with the same people. These interviews and workshops were crucial to Watson & Associates as there was a benefit to obtaining the perspectives of those serving the municipality.

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### **Financial Implications:**

On April 9, 2024, Council approved report 2024-93, which allotted a maximum budget of \$80,000 for the Council Composition and Ward Boundary Review. Watson & Associates and staff have successfully delivered the project in a timely and efficient manner, and within the approved budget.

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### **Public Engagement:**

As part of the Council Composition and Ward Boundary Review, a comprehensive public engagement plan was developed by Watson & Associates in collaboration with staff from Communications and Legislative Services. The plan was delivered in two phases and aimed to ensure broad and inclusive participation. Phase 1 included two in-person open houses on December 9, 2024 at City Hall as well as a survey that was open from December 9 to December 30, 2024. The survey in Phase 1 evaluated the public's priorities and perspectives on the existing council composition and ward structure. Phase 2 included two in-person open houses on May 14 and May 15, 2025 as well as a survey that was open from April 28 to May 20, 2025. The survey in Phase 2 asked respondents to assess and rank a set of preliminary ward boundary options. Information regarding the open houses and surveys was circulated through the City's social media. Lastly, a public-facing engagement page was created on the City of Port Colborne's website to raise awareness about the Council Composition and Ward Boundary review as well as to give residents the opportunity to provide feedback. Through the webpage, residents could access the online surveys, view proposed

options and review background material (Discussion Papers, Preliminary Options Report etc.). Further information regarding the public consultation and engagement process can be found in the final report prepared by Watson & Associates, attached as Appendix A.

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### **Strategic Plan Alignment:**

The initiative contained within this report supports the following pillar(s) of the strategic plan:

- Welcoming, Livable, Healthy Community
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### **Conclusion:**

The Council Composition and Ward Boundary Review was successfully completed as it met all key milestones and deliverables. Through a collaborative effort between Watson & Associates and City staff, the project was delivered on time, within budget, and with a strong emphasis on transparency, public engagement, and legislative compliance. With Council's direction on the final recommendation, this project will be concluded, and any required next steps such as the preparation of a by-law will be coordinated in alignment with the 2026 Municipal Election timeline. It is important to note that changes to ward boundaries may have broad and lasting implications. While some impacts will be administrative, the most significant relates to political representation whether through a realignment of geographic areas or changes to the number of elected representatives within the City of Port Colborne. As we move forward, staff remain committed to ensuring a seamless transition and will continue to provide the guidance and support needed to keep citizens informed, engaged, and well-served throughout the process

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### **Appendices:**

- a. 2024/2025 Council Composition and Ward Boundary Review – Final Report by Watson & Associates Economists Ltd.

Respectfully submitted,

Charlotte Madden  
City Clerk/Manager of Legislative Services  
905-228-8031  
Charlotte.Madden@portcolborne.ca

**Report Approval:**

All reports reviewed and approved by the Department Director and also the City Treasurer when relevant. Final review and approval by the Chief Administrative Officer.