



MMRA *bulletin*

This is an election publication of the Mississippi Mills Resident's Association, Fall 2006

De-amalgamation: let's talk

One issue avoided in previous elections is our town's amalgamation from three independent municipalities in 1998. Candidates continue to avoid discussing the state of our union, though it is as obvious (and as dysfunctional) as a 5000-pound elephant at a picnic.

People in all three wards are not happy with the status quo and want de-amalgamation discussed. The MMRA feels this issue should be addressed because we cannot correct the inequities if we don't talk about where amalgamation is failing.

Broken promises

One complaint common to all three wards is that amalgamation failed to deliver any cost savings. Amalgamation was supposed to produce a smaller (and thus cheaper) municipal government. The 1997 "Restructuring Options" report by accountant Howard Allan, which convinced many local politicians to support amalgamation, promised a significant staff reduction in an amalgamated town.

The Allen report listed 16 staff in the original municipalities in positions of CAO, clerk, treasurer, accounting, reception, secretary, and road department heads. The report said an amalgamated Almonte, Ramsay and Pakenham would need just six people in administration and one in charge of roads and public works. The lowest number of staff Mississippi Mills ever had in the roles Allen examined was nine. The latest organizational chart shows positions for 18 people in those

roles. So, amalgamation did not deliver the promise of a smaller government. And now, the town plans to expand the town hall building in Ramsay to provide more office space for the growing staff.

The Allen report also calculated that an amalgamated town would save \$583,500 annually through economies of scale and efficiencies. Any savings, if they ever existed, were fleeting. The tax rate has increased every year but one since amalgamation, usually by a rate higher than inflation. Downloading from the province, higher salaries for administrative staff, and the unionization of the amalgamated roads staff all contributed to higher costs.

The 1999 town budget was just over \$5.4 million. For 2006, the budget is \$7.5 million. This 39% increase cannot be blamed on population growth. There has been a steady but slow increase in residents amounting to less than 10% over these same years.

Ramsay issues

The biggest complaint from Ramsay residents is they are not getting value for their money. Ramsay ward taxpayers contribute 44.47% of all residential taxes compared to 34.81% for Almonte ward and 20.72% for Pakenham ward. Yet, Ramsay appears to have received the least benefit. The town spent over \$1.25 million already on renovations to the old Almonte town hall, with more pending. Pakenham got \$800,000 for renovations to its community centre. Ramsay has received no extra benefit above the basic civic services all the wards enjoy.

The old Ramsay township was fiscally sound. The township was in the black. In the last four years of its independent existence, the township had no property tax rate increases. Since amalgamation, the reserve fund disappeared into the coffers of Mississippi Mills and town tax rates increase annually.

Policing is an issue with some Ramsay residents. Daytime break-ins are common as thieves target houses daily vacated by commuters. The Town has turned down pleas for extra rural police patrols. Yet, when Almonters complained about vandalism in 2005, an extra police patrol was quickly brought in for the summer.

Almonte issues

With Almonters, the major irritant is the future of the old town hall. Many Almonte business owners, residents and councillors are on record as wanting some of the town staff housed in the old building. They argue, with more than a little credibility, that it makes more sense to use the old town hall for staff than to spend \$800,000 expanding the new town hall in Ramsay to accommodate staff. (Of course, if the staff numbers hadn't mushroomed, no expansion would be necessary.)

The Almonte business community believes that bringing town staff to the downtown would encourage more "shopping locally" among staff and councillors, and that this would be a good example to all residents.

Almonte residents who favour de-amalgamation also favour "local focus"; that is, with de-amalgamation each ward is free again to concentrate on ward-specific issues and their consequences within a more manageable, limited geographic, social, and economic area.

Hospitals

The town added a levy to all tax bills to raise \$500,000 for the Almonte hospital. People in all wards resent being forced to donate to a hospital through the tax bill. This Almonte-centric approach to hospital funding has especially offended many rural residents.

People in the southern half of Ramsay ward use the Carleton Place hospital. Mississippi Mills donated a mere \$10,000 to that hospital's recent fundraising campaign. People in the northern part of Pakenham ward use the Arnprior hospital. That hospital has received nothing from our town.

De-amalgamation legality

The Ontario government will allow de-amalgamation. John Gerretsen, the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing, has told various proponents of de-amalgamation across Ontario that "municipal restructuring" can proceed if certain criteria are met. For example, in a letter to the Carleton County Landowner's Association, he wrote "any such proposal would have to be approved and submitted by municipal council as well as demonstrate property tax fairness for all residents and fiscal self-sustainability for all proposed new and existing municipalities."

The move to de-amalgamate must come from council; therefore, council candidates should be open to the discussion.

Other bulletins in this series

- #1 Downtown Almonte
- #3 Sewage treatment options
- #4 Almonte's plan for growth
- #5 Sunday hunting
- #6 Regulating pesticides

The MMRA Board has reviewed these election 2006 bulletin articles for factual accuracy. The bulletins, and the opinions represented within them, are meant to stimulate community discussion and awareness in the time period leading up to the 2006 municipal elections in Mississippi Mills. Your vote counts!

The MMRA is a non-profit residents' association. For more information on the MMRA or to join, visit our web site at www.mmra.ca.