

CFF continues to press for deamalgamation
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The perpetual cry for de-amalgamation continues to be a thorn in the side not only of Hamilton's municipal government but also for a good number of other seats of city government in Ontario, Committee to Free Flamborough (CFF) member Stan Haworth said this week.

Ottawa, Chatham/Kent, Sudbury and Kawartha Lakes all have segments of their populations that want to return to their smaller government roots with much more manageable and affordable budgets, Haworth contended. The reasons, he says, are simple. "There's no community of interest" between the small towns and the big cities that have gobbled them up. "It's more than just an urban/rural split" that divides Hamilton from Flamborough, he said. As a resident of Carlisle, he doesn't shop or work in Hamilton, nor does he use the city's recreational services...and he doesn't believe he's very far from the norm amongst his neighbours.

"We're like two solitudes," he said of Flamborough and Hamilton. "Putting us together is like mixing oil with water." Haworth's comments came in response to Flamborough councillor Margaret McCarthy's recent call for the province "to revisit the entire issue of amalgamation." Haworth, who supports the local councillor, said a review of the issue is "way past due." McCarthy's action was prompted by news that Ottawa councillor Clive Doucet, who originally supported amalgamation in that area, has had a change of heart and is planning to muster rural residents' support in hopes of having the issue put to a referendum during the 2010 municipal election.

"I think it's certainly time" to look at the amalgamation issue, McCarthy said this week. Referring to Doucet, she noted, "Obviously, there's a will do so. When a former supporter says it doesn't work, when that happens, a change is in the wind."

But Marvin Ryder, who chaired the Transition Board that oversaw the creation of the amalgamated City of Hamilton, doesn't believe the Ontario government is interested in reviewing the amalgamation of municipalities. "Not now, given the current state of the economy," he said, indicating that the government has its "plate full" with the challenges of the current recession.

Even beyond that, Ryder, a professor of marketing and entrepreneurship at McMaster University's DeGroot School of Business, explained that provincial rules governing binding referenda changed about eight or nine years ago, making it very difficult to meet the requirements. The voter turnout percentage required for a referendum is substantially higher than the average percentage of those who vote in municipal elections and a vote on the amalgamation question would include not just Flamborough residents but "would be within the municipal unit," meaning the whole city of Hamilton would be involved, he said.

Ryder agreed with Haworth that most parts of Flamborough aren't geographically aligned with Hamilton. Unlike other suburban municipalities, such as Ancaster, Stoney Creek and Dundas which are "joined at the hip" with Hamilton, Flamborough is separated from the city by areas of "empty space." He suggested that Waterdown residents likely feel more aligned with

residents of Aldershot or west Burlington.

But he argued the City of Hamilton has shown sensitivity to its rural/urban diversity. "There has been some recognition of diversity; they've indicated they do understand and have tried to reach out.

Could they do more? Yes."

Still, Doucet's suggestion that Ottawa's rural communities might be better served by not being part of the amalgamated city is music to the ears of Haworth and Roman Sarachman, who have been part of a local campaign to have Flamborough de-amalgamate from Hamilton for the past seven years. Sarachman said one of the main reasons for dissension in Ottawa is the city is planning to build an arena that suburban residents aren't going to use.

"Does that sound familiar?" he said.

Sarachman isn't surprised the majority of Flamborough residents have consistently shown support for seceding from Hamilton given the hefty municipal tax increases they've had since amalgamation in 2001. This year is no exception, as Hamilton seems headed for a 6.1 per cent average tax increase for homeowners unless the province agrees to the city's request for a \$16.5-million grant to help cover social services costs that would result in lowering the proposed tax increase to 2.2 per cent. But added to that will be a phased-in Current Value Assessment (CVA), which in Sarachman's case amounts to another 4 per cent increase. That would mean an increase ranging from 6.2 to 10.1 per cent. Last year, the average municipal tax bill for Flamborough residents, without CVA included, was 9.9 per cent.

Sarachman said the increases are simply too high, not only in Flamborough but also in other suburban communities that were merged with nearby urban centres across Ontario.

Haworth estimates Flamborough residents contribute about \$65 million to \$70 million in taxes to Hamilton each year and this, he said, explains the city's reluctance to let Flamborough de-amalgamate. But actions like those of the Ottawa councillor bring new hope to those fighting for de-amalgamation, he said. "It will certainly make the province sit up and take notice."

Right now, the FCC is working on a standalone Flamborough budget that it plans to present this summer to prove that Flamborough can be fiscally viable without Hamilton. Under the plan, Flamborough would retain the municipal portion of the revenues from the Flamboro Slots amounting to about \$5 million annually.

Ryder suggests those doing the financial study look at what the population of Flamborough could support if the Slots revenues weren't included in their budget. As for protests about high taxes, he said it's impossible to predict how high taxes would be in Flamborough now, if the town hadn't been amalgamated with Hamilton.

Flamborough, as a stand-alone community, would be obliged to invest significant sums of money in hiring someone to provide many municipal services, Ryder said, while cautioning that even though smaller municipalities are seen as being more frugal than their larger counterparts, they, too, can become embroiled in multi-million dollar expenditures such as the Borer's Creek lawsuit debt that Flamborough incurred prior to amalgamation.

