

Trying to heal the wounds of municipal amalgamation
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This is the first of a three-part series looking at how Stoney Creek has fared since amalgamation with Hamilton Jan. 1, 2001.

Some people may not think it's a big deal or may not even notice, but when Anne Bain saw the RCMP sign had taken over for the City of Stoney Creek one at the former city hall, she called it another nail in the coffin.

"The communities are being swallowed up. We haven't lost it, but we have lost a lot. The sign, that was the last little bit of history," says Ms. Bain, who was mayor of Stoney Creek for six years.

"You can slowly see it going. The sign was the last thing. We still have our municipal service centre in there. Pretty soon everything will be in Hamilton. We will lose all our identity."

Ms. Bain has lived in Stoney Creek for 52 years and spent 15 on city council. She was the last mayor of Stoney Creek before it amalgamated with Dundas, Flamborough, Ancaster and Hamilton to form the new City of Hamilton Jan. 1, 2001.

"I was very proud of Stoney Creek. We were doing well," she said.

In fact, in 1999, residential tax rates in Stoney Creek were reduced by 2.2 per cent without losing staff or financial help from the province.

After a 0.1 per cent increase in 2001, Stoney Creek's taxes went up 4.3 per cent in 2002, followed by a 2.6 per cent jump in 2003. The average increase since amalgamation has been 2.9 per cent.

"It was supposed to be more efficient. They have not proven it's more efficient. If it were, why did they stop? It went right off the radar. Niagara was supposed to be next, but they stopped with us."

While amalgamation has gone off the provincial government's radar, more than seven years later, it is still on many Hamilton residents' minds. This year's budget inflamed passions, especially in Flamborough, after council removed the area's slots subsidy.

Sharon Pieon, who was part of the Battle for Stoney Creek, which fought for de-amalgamation, says if it weren't for her grandchildren who live nearby, she and her husband would leave.

"We pay more taxes, higher bus fares and there is not a lot more service. As a one-income family, you work so hard to get ahead. You take one step forward and two steps back," she says.

"They did it to pay their debt, when they couldn't manage what they had. But the more you make, the more you spend. It was just a money grabbing scheme to take care of Hamilton."

Andrew Sancton, a political scientist at the University of Western Ontario and a leading researcher on municipal restructuring in Canada, says the real measure of the success of amalgamation is whether residents feel better off after than before.

As far as the price of amalgamation, he says it is difficult to determine how much costs within a city would have risen through reasons like inflation and growth alone.

"Also, Stoney Creek might have chosen to have higher taxes in order to have better snow removal," he said, pointing out it's impossible to predict the way things might have been.

Before amalgamation, the Regional Municipality of Hamilton Wentworth provided public transit, police and social services, while the municipalities provided fire and recreation services. Both shared responsibility for roads and water. A chair presided over a regional council with representatives of each of Hamilton's wards and two each from other constituent municipalities.

Mr. Sancton calls the regional government "a tremendous innovation."

"You save costs, eliminate overlap and duplication. It is difficult to understand what the justification for amalgamation was then. Perhaps they thought if it's already being done at a regional level, might as well get rid of the other municipalities."

While Mr. Sancton says some departments, like sewers and often policing, benefit from economies of scale, others, like recreation might not.

"You can have a huge recreation department, but it's not delivering service more efficiently because of the nature of the service," he said. "By eliminating the capability of different, smaller size units to decide what programs to offer, you're encouraging inefficiency. Some areas will have too much, others not enough."

"One of the stupidest arguments is that by creating bigger government, you have less bureaucracy. That's absolutely nuts. It's beyond my comprehension."

Maria Pearson, who was on Stoney Creek council from 1991 to 2000 and is in her second term on Hamilton council says it takes longer to get anything done.

"When it was Stoney Creek, you could just walk into an office and ask for information and they'd get back to you.

"And now there are so many committees, it's impossible to even attend them all. That's a frustration. Even to read the reports, to digest everything is so overwhelming."

Ms. Bain, the only former mayor to stay on council after amalgamation, saw major differences.

"In Stoney Creek, staff respected council and council respected staff. There was yelling, but if you yelled, you were put in your place," she said. "In Hamilton it seemed staff and council were against each other. You didn't seem to have blame in the smaller communities. Everybody just worked it out.

"When you're bigger I understand you can't see everybody and you worry about security, but in Stoney Creek, my office door was always open. You could just walk in. I know you can't always be available in big cities. But that's why bigger is not better."

Ms. Bain lost her re-election bid after one term on Hamilton council.

"It's the best thing that ever happened to me. I wouldn't have survived in there," she said.

Ron Marini, who was Stoney Creek's director of planning, said a smaller community also meant more scrutiny.

"I'd be in the bank line-up and have people yelling at me in line or you'd go to the tailor and you had to have your head on a swivel, because people were coming at you from all angles," he said. "The effect of that was people were engaged. The reaction was instant."

When amalgamation came up, Mr. Marini remembers thinking, "what for? We had our house in order."

As MPP, Brad Clark's reaction to amalgamation was "horror."

"I ran in my campaign against amalgamation. The rest of the Hamilton candidates would not address it, except for me and Toni Skarica and we were the only Conservatives elected.

"It was clear to everyone it was not a cost saving exercise. By creating a larger municipality, your salary grids have to be restructured up to higher pay level. Any savings would be eaten up by a larger city and that's exactly what happened."

Mr. Clark said residents were most concerned about their loss of identity and democratic representation.

"The number of councilors went from 50 to 16 (including the mayor), salaries are significantly higher than in Stoney Creek and taxes have consistently gone up, which was predictable. Inflation has been about two per cent

a year. Our costs have not averaged two per cent a year. It's been far more than that. The only thing it did do was streamline the planning process."

Ms. Bain says while taxes have gone up, services have gone down, citing debris along roadways and lack of grass cutting as two of her pet peeves.

"The difference was if we didn't have it, we didn't spend it. Look at what they are spending on a new city hall," she said. "You didn't get that in a smaller community, maybe because you had people come down all the time. You would feel that responsibility."

Joe Rinaldo, the city's general manager, finance and corporate services, says the amalgamated city has spent money in important places, including \$6 million to expand ambulance service, made significant investments to improve waste management, diverting waste from the landfill and put 'a lot of money' into snow removal.

"Councillors have told us constituents were extremely satisfied during what was a very severe winter," he said. "Unfortunately there is a cost to these things."

Mr. Rinaldo also points out Stoney Creek's average tax increase of 2.9 per cent since amalgamation is in line with the rest of the province.

But Ms. Pearson laments all that was lost. In 1999, Stoney Creek had a plan to have every street re-surfaced and urbanized within 20 years.

"That was thrown out. You can't do that for this whole city," she said. "We had a lot of plans that just won't get done. It's just not as important in the larger city. Unless it's in their backyard, they don't see it.

"I can't say there's an improvement. Are we where we anticipated we would be if were Stoney Creek? No I can't say that."

Next week: What we've gained and what we've lost

2006 municipal spending

Dollars per capita by service area

The average of 12 cities (include Brantford, Burlington, Hamilton, Kitchener, London, Mississauga, Oshawa, Sudbury, St. Catharines, Toronto, Windsor)

Average

Fire 133

Police 238

Roads 134

Winter control 33

Transit 84

Waste collection 16

Parks 42

Recycling 19

Planning 19

Hamilton

Fire 120

Police 231

Roads 130

Winter control 31

Transit 83

Waste collection 27

Parks 33

Recycling 18

Planning 9

SOURCE: City of Hamilton

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