Citizens' Attitudes Toward Municipal Amalgamation in Three Ontario Municipalities*

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Introduction

One of the most contentious policies introduced by the Harris Conservative government in Ontario as part of its Common Sense Revolution was municipal amalgamation. Although the highest-profile amalgamation was the creation of the Toronto megacity, there have been many other amalgamations across the province, with the result that the number of municipalities was reduced by half in the period from 1996 to 2001. The purpose of the amalgamations was to improve efficiency and reduce municipal spending and to decrease the number of politicians without reducing accessibility to local elected officials (Downey and Williams 1998; Williams and Downey 1999). In many cases, however, there was opposition to amalgamation because residents felt that the larger amalgamated municipalities would increase taxes without providing additional services and destroy their sense

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of local community.[1]

The Ontario amalgamations fit into a pattern of controversial amalgamations that have occurred in some, but not all, other provinces. Andrew Sancton reviewed the amalgamations in New Brunswick and Nova Scotia as well as Ontario and failed to find the expected cost savings (Sancton 1996). Reviews of the Toronto amalgamation by Enid Slack (2001) and Fernand Martin (2001) also failed to find any savings. The contentious amalgamation that created the Halifax Regional Municipality in 1996 has been studied extensively and some of the results of those studies will be discussed later and compared to the results in this paper.

This paper is part of a larger research project that is tracking the impact of amalgamations on three Ontario municipalities. The objective of the project is to determine whether the goals of the provincial government related to efficiency of service delivery, access to councillors, and sense of community in the new municipalities are being met. Specifically, this paper reports on citizens' attitudes to the amalgamation (before and after), citizens' perceptions of value for taxes, and citizens' sense of attachment to the new and old municipalities.

The three municipalities are Central Elgin, Chatham-Kent, and Kingston. The Municipality of Central Elgin (population 11,000) was created as a result of a voluntary agreement[2] merging two villages and a township in Elgin County. In Chatham-Kent (population 100,000), local negotiations directed at a series of limited amalgamations failed and a complete amalgamation of a central urban area with a county and its twenty-one towns, townships, and villages was imposed by a commissioner's order. The new City of Kingston (population 100,000) was the result of a voluntary agreement merging the central city and two neighbouring townships, both with significant urban areas. Thus, the three amalgamations were quite different: two were voluntary, one was imposed; one was mostly rural, one urban-centred, but included a significant rural area, and one a mix of urban and rural. The Chatham-Kent and Kingston mergers were the second and third largest amalgamations (after Toronto) in the first round of restructuring effective January 1, 1998 (Hollick and Siegel 2001).

The findings in this paper are based on telephone surveys of residents of the three amalgamated communities conducted in the fall of 2000 (Chatham-Kent) and winter of 2001 (Central Elgin, Kingston) – about

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1. There is scholarly research on municipal mergers that validates the concern regarding tax increases (Bish 2001; Sancton 2000).
2. Given the atmosphere of the time, the use of the word "voluntary" here might not be totally accurate (Siegel, forthcoming).

three years after the amalgamations. Since Central Elgin and Kingston each consisted of only three former municipalities, it was possible to conduct separate surveys of each constituent unit so that attitudes of residents of the formerly separate units could be compared with one another. This was not possible for Chatham-Kent because of the large number of constituent municipalities (twenty-two). Respondents were chosen at random from local telephone directories. The sample size used (530 for Central Elgin; 385 for Chatham-Kent; 558 for Kingston) produces a level of accuracy of plus or minus five percentage points, nineteen times out of twenty. University students who were trained in interview techniques conducted the interviews.

The questions fell into five general categories: service levels, including value for taxes; accessibility to municipal government; attachment to community; general knowledge of local government; and attitudes toward amalgamation. This paper reports on value for taxes, sense of attachment to community, and attitudes toward amalgamation.

The telephone surveys were supplemented by more in-depth interviews of community leaders from a broad range of agricultural, business, labour, recreational, and social groups in the three municipalities. The purpose of these interviews was to supplement the telephone interviews to find reasons for views held and enrich our understanding of the basis for certain views.

Attitudes Toward Amalgamation

One appropriate method to assess an amalgamation is to simply ask residents if they are satisfied with the results. This is a way of measuring political acceptance of the amalgamation, regardless of what objective changes in outcomes might have occurred. Prior to all three amalgamations there was a strong feeling from letters to the editor and other anecdotal and informal indicators that there was significant opposition to the amalgamations. However, there were no systematic public opinion surveys undertaken in any of the jurisdictions.[3] To determine attitudes to amalgamation, the following questions were asked:

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3. *The Kingston Whig-Standard* did commission a public opinion survey on this issue, but it was undertaken more than two years before the amalgamation occurred (September 23, 1995).

TABLE 1 Attitudes Toward Amalgamation – Before and Three Years After

	# of Respondents	Strongly in Favour (%)	Somewhat in Favour (%)	No Opinion (%)	Somewhat Opposed (%)	Strongly Opposed (%)
Belmont						
Before	125	0.8	6.4	48.0	20.8	24.0
After	120	2.5	6.7	41.7	22.5	26.7
Port Stanley						
Before	141	2.8	6.4	22.7	31.9	36.2
After	139	5.0	7.2	19.4	29.5	38.8
Yarmouth						
Before	258	3.5	10.1	48.4	25.2	12.8
After	250	3.6	16.0	35.2	29.2	16.0
Chatham-Kent						
Before	385	6.2	8.8	31.4	29.4	24.2
After	380	7.1	20.5	21.6	24.7	26.1
City of Kingston						
Before	196	12.8	17.9	44.4	17.9	7.1
After	191	14.1	17.3	38.7	23.0	6.8
Kingston Township						
Before	201	8.0	14.9	29.4	23.4	24.4
After	198	8.1	19.2	21.7	24.2	26.8
Pittsburgh Township						
Before	158	6.3	10.1	19.6	27.2	36.7
After	156	7.1	12.8	16.0	26.3	37.8

- Before the amalgamation occurred, were you opposed to the amalgamation, in favour, or had no opinion?
- After almost (or slightly more than) three years of living in the amalgamated municipality, has your opinion changed?
- In what way? Are you now opposed or in favour?

As Table 1 indicates, all three amalgamations had very little support before they occurred. A combination of fear of the unknown, breakdown of community, loss of accountability, and concern regarding changes in tax and service levels made people wary of what was about to happen. In most jurisdictions, the "no opinion" responses were high with the exception of the two municipalities that harboured the strongest opposition, Pittsburgh and Port Stanley. The generally high incidence of "no opinion" indicates that the average citizen might feel that he or she did not have sufficient information to render an opinion and therefore was taking a 'wait-and-see' approach. Alternatively, residents might not be interested in questions of municipal structure.

Table 2 summarizes the change in attitude over the three-year period. These figures were calculated from Table 1 by combining those strongly

TABLE 2 Change in Attitude Toward Amalgamation – Before and After

	Change in Supporters	Change in No Opinion	Change in Opponents
Central Elgin			
Belmont	+2.0	-6.3	+4.4
Port Stanley	+3.0	-3.3	+0.2
Yarmouth	+6.0	-13.2	+7.2
Chatham-Kent	+12.6	-9.8	-2.8
Kingston			
City of Kingston	+0.7	-5.7	+4.8
Kingston Township	+4.4	-7.7	+3.2
Pittsburgh Township	+3.5	-3.6	+0.2

Note: Some figures do not add because of rounding.

opposed and somewhat opposed into one figure, and doing the same for those in favour. Not surprisingly, over the three-year period, there was a reduction in the percentage of people expressing no opinion. As residents saw the results of the amalgamations, more of them were able to choose sides one way or the other. In most municipalities, there was a significant movement in both directions—support and opposition.[4] Chatham-Kent was the only municipality that shows a significant trend toward supporting the amalgamation.

Value for Taxes

One of the major goals of the amalgamation process was improvement of the efficiency of municipal service delivery. A common method of evaluating efficiency improvements is to analyse changes in levels of expenditure adjusting for changes in the quantity and quality of services delivered. (This research is currently being undertaken by the authors.) However, it is also important to hear the subjective assessment of value for taxes as seen by local residents who are the consumers of municipal services. Table 3 reports on the residents' attitudes regarding value received for their tax dollars.

Table 3 indicates that most respondents in every jurisdiction, except the former City of Kingston, said that the value they were receiving for their taxes had declined in the three years since amalgamation. This gen-

4. This can be contrasted with a similar survey in Halifax where the percentage of people stating no opinion began small and has changed little, but opposition to the amalgamation has grown over time, while support has declined (Poel 2000: 35).

TABLE 3 Citizens' Perception of Value for Taxes[1]

Comparing the situation before and after amalgamation on January 1, 1998, is the value that you are receiving for your taxes now better, the same, or worse than it was before the creation of the new Municipality of Central Elgin/Chatham-Kent/Kingston?

	Number of Respondents	Better (%)	Same (%)	Worse (%)
Central Elgin				
Belmont	125	7.2	45.6	47.2
Port Stanley	141	9.2	23.4	62.4
Yarmouth	258	5.4	44.2	50.4
Chatham-Kent	369	13.3	39.0	47.7
Kingston				
City of Kingston	178	9.0	52.2	38.8
Kingston Township	189	3.7	38.6	57.7
Pittsburgh Township	156	6.4	25.0	68.6

eral reaction is not surprising since there was significant opposition to the amalgamation in virtually every jurisdiction. The two former municipalities with the highest percentage of respondents saying that their value for taxes had declined (Pittsburgh and Port Stanley) were two of the major centres of protest prior to amalgamation (Berry 1998a, 1998b, 1998c). This finding is fairly similar to a comparable survey undertaken in Halifax (Poel 2000: 39).

Interviews with community leaders indicated that there is still a significant amount of residual negative feelings about the amalgamations, which were generally viewed as forced, even if they were the result of voluntary agreements. The responses could also reflect the fact that respondents simply did not want to admit that they were receiving good value for their taxes.

The City of Kingston exception should not be surprising because one of the purposes of the Kingston amalgamation was to correct what was perceived as a "free rider" problem that allowed the suburban municipalities to obtain urban services from the former city without paying for them. Thus, the residents of the former city indicated that their value for taxes had improved whereas the residents of the former suburban municipalities indicated worse value for their taxes since their taxes were increasing rapidly.[5]

Sense of Attachment to Community

One of the concerns regarding amalgamations was that residents would lose their sense of attachment to their local communities because the local communities would disappear as separate legal entities. Central Elgin and Chatham-Kent attempted to soften this negative feeling by allowing the former areas to retain identifying signs and other vestiges of their previous existence, whereas, in Kingston, the names of the previous townships were replaced by Kingston East and Kingston West. A related concern was the fear that the closure of the local town office would result in greater travel costs to a distant and less familiar centralized office. The closure also had sentimental and economic dimensions. Some were nostalgic for the passing of a former time represented by the handsome old civic building in the centre of the village, which would be sold to a private developer. The economic dimension arose because if residents had to go the large city to handle municipal business, they were more likely to do their shopping in the big city as well.

Table 4 reports on residents' sense of attachment to their local community. In every jurisdiction, the majority of respondents felt that after three years there had been no change in their sense of attachment to their community. The remaining respondents were generally split fairly evenly. In Central Elgin, more people in every jurisdiction felt that their sense of attachment had decreased, although in Port Stanley the difference was fairly small. In Chatham-Kent, the residents were split. In Kingston, residents of Pittsburgh saw an increase in attachment, while the difference in the other two jurisdictions was quite small. Respondents who saw a decline in their attachment frequently pointed to the closing of the local civic building and the centralization of services in the far-away new municipal building.

Interviews with community leaders shed some light on these responses. The argument was made that "community" was a function of neighbours and local churches or informal groups that had little to do with the political-legal boundary lines of the municipality. In addition, some mentioned that the business, recreational, and social organizations had long ago restructured themselves to reflect the fact that their service area was

5. In the years immediately following amalgamation, there was significant protest from the residents of the former suburban municipalities that their taxes were increasing rapidly (Outhit 1998a, 1998b).

TABLE 4 Citizens' Attachment to Local Community[1]

Since the creation of the Municipality of Central Elgin/Chatham-Kent/ Kingston, has your sense of attachment to your local community increased, stayed the same, or decreased?

	Number of Respondents	Increased (%)	Same (%)	Decreased (%)
Central Elgin				
Belmont	126	11.1	74.6	14.3
Port Stanley	136	17.6	64.0	18.4
Yarmouth	252	7.5	78.2	14.3
Chatham-Kent	382	16.8	66.5	16.8
Kingston				
City of Kingston	190	8.4	82.6	8.9
Kingston Township	197	12.7	75.1	12.2
Pittsburgh Township	157	17.2	72.6	10.2

the larger metropolitan area; the municipal amalgamation was a case of the local governments belatedly recognizing what these other organizations had recognized long ago.

Although in most communities a significant minority of people felt that their attachment to their local community decreased, in some communities, community activism increased. For example, when amalgamation appeared imminent, residents of Dresden (a former village in Chatham-Kent) formed a ratepayers association to ensure that the interests of their community were protected. In addition, a very active "Friends of the Library" was formed as well as a Dresden Chamber of Commerce. Thus, the threat posed by the creation of the larger government resulted in a stronger and more active local community group.

The survey results indicate that most people still held a significant attachment to their local community even after amalgamation. An equally interesting question was whether residents felt a sense of attachment to the new larger entity.

Table 5 indicates that in all jurisdictions a majority of respondents had not begun to think of the new municipality as a community. However, in most municipalities, approximately one-third of respondents had begun to accept the new municipality as their community, perhaps due to the fact that, in some jurisdictions, the political-legal change in jurisdictions merely reflected the practical reality that had been in place for some time. For example, Chatham was the central shopping/service centre for much of Kent County long before the amalgamation occurred. Similarly in Kingston, the three municipalities were already integrated in terms of shopping

TABLE 5 Citizens' Attachment to the New Municipality as a Community[1]

Do you now think of your community as the new Municipality of Central Elgin/Chatham-Kent/Kingston?

	Number of respondents	Yes (%)	No (%)
Central Elgin			
Belmont	124	21.0	79.0
Port Stanley	144	19.4	80.6
Yarmouth	262	38.9	61.1
Chatham-Kent	385	35.8	64.2
Kingston			
City of Kingston	198	40.4	59.6
Kingston Township	200	35.5	64.5
Pittsburgh Township	160	36.9	63.1

and employment, and were cooperating in the provision of several services. The two localities that stand out as having low levels of integration into the broader community (Belmont and Port Stanley) are both villages with their own central shopping areas, while the new municipality of Central Elgin does not have a central shopping area, but instead relies on the adjacent municipalities of Aylmer and St. Thomas.

Conclusion

The survey results indicate that in the communities studied, there was very little prior support for the amalgamations. Since the amalgamations, there has been a decrease in the number of people expressing "no opinion" offset by increases in both support and opposition. Only in Chatham-Kent was there a significant movement in support of the amalgamation.

Contrary to the provincial expectation that amalgamations would result in more efficient service delivery, in every jurisdiction, except the former City of Kingston, the majority of respondents felt that the value they were receiving for their taxes declined since amalgamation.

In terms of attachment to the community, most residents saw no change, but those who did, were evenly divided between those who saw an increase and those who saw a decrease. Most residents also had not yet shifted their allegiance to the new larger municipality, although in most cases, a significant minority did feel a sense of attachment to the new municipality.

Possibly, the most significant finding is the degree of variation in finding among the municipalities. For example, initial opposition was strongest in Pittsburgh and Port Stanley and that seems to have been carried forward. There was also strong initial opposition in Chatham-Kent, but that seems to be weakening. Thus, it is very difficult to generalize about results. On several dimensions, some additional support for the amalgamations is emerging, but this is happening very slowly and is unfolding differently in different jurisdictions.

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