

Amalgamation anyone?

Written by MIKE BAKER

With Premier Doug Ford last month announcing the Province would be reviewing regional governments across Ontario, it has left locals pondering a potential amalgamation here in Dufferin County.

The County is currently made up of eight local municipalities ? Amaranth, East Garafraxa, Grand Valley, Melancthon, Mono, Mulmur, Orangeville and Shelburne. Each of those communities has its own individual wants and needs, and they don't always overlap.

Talk of amalgamation, at least among some of the region's elected officials, has been met with disdain. The general attitude appears to be 'don't fix what isn't broken'. I have observed at least one local mayor speak openly on social media against potential amalgamation, while a former mayor once told me bringing Dufferin's communities together just wouldn't work. And I tend to agree.

Prior to moving to Dufferin County, I lived in Lindsay, the focal point of the City of Kawartha Lakes. Amalgamation was forced on the municipality back in 2001, eliminating individual councils in Bobcaygeon, Fenelon Falls, Lindsay, Omemee and Woodville. Close to two decades later, the community is still waiting to reap the benefits of such a move, with many in the region openly declaring the decision, initiated by Mike Harris' PC government, a mistake.

For the record, I don't think we're likely to see something similar take place here in Dufferin County, at least not for a while. A true amalgamation, in my eyes, should be initiated for the betterment of all of those involved. And it should be initiated by those directly involved and effected.

At present, it could be argued that the only community to benefit from amalgamation would be Orangeville. Its residents are among the highest taxed in Ontario ? dissolving the municipality and adopting a regional platform would likely see costs associated with big ticket items such as the Orangeville Police Service and Orangeville Fire Department spread more evenly across the county. It would probably make life more affordable for those living in Orangeville, but I'm not sure residents of Melancthon, Mono and Mulmur would be too happy to incur extra costs for the sole purpose of the region, essentially, becoming one big family living under the same roof.

While amalgamation is not the answer, I do believe there's more room to work with our neighbours here in Dufferin County. A regional police force, likely, will never happen. The additional costs for some of the rural municipalities currently policed by the OPP would be too great. However, if both Orangeville and Shelburne decide against signing with the provincial force later this year, there could be potential for an Orangeville-Shelburne police department.

The \$8.2 million net budget for 2019 is a huge burden on Orangeville taxpayers. Likewise, an approximate expense of between \$6 million and \$8 million to build a new police station in Shelburne is haunting that particular community. If the councils and police services boards of each community came together, I'm sure a resolution could be found that would benefit each municipality.

Transit is another area where we could work together. Orangeville has invested more than \$1 million into its new transit system over the past few years, but current ridership isn't where anyone thought or wants it to be. Forming an agreement with the likes of Shelburne, who are crying out for transit options, and Grand Valley would not only bring more people into the community, but it would help to offset the annual costs of operating your own transit service.

Orangeville has always been perceived as the big, bad bully within County Council chambers. With a new Council in Orangeville promising to co-exist, get along and work with anyone it needs to, I wonder if there may be opportunities to turn around its apparent reputation and build some bridges. It would only benefit the municipality in the long run.