

A tale of two towns

EDITORIAL

IT WILL BE INTERESTING to see how happy Orangeville residents will be in 2030, after a decade in which the town will have been policed by the Ontario Provincial Police, instead of by its own local force, like the one in Shelburne.

If the predictions of a consultant and the town's CAO, Ed Brennan, prove true, taxpayers will be footing only about two-thirds of the cost they would have faced had Orangeville Council not voted in 2019 to scrap the Orangeville Police Service (OPS).

Then again, it's just as possible that 10 years from now the bill for taxpayers will be just about what it would have been had the OPS and its strong leadership been maintained.

Why? Because everything will depend on policies adopted by the current and future provincial governments as they try to reduce or eliminate their endemic budgetary deficits.

In all the months of deliberations by the current and previous Town Councils, no one has come up with any evidence that the actual cost of policing Orangeville will vary significantly depending on who does it. The biggest cost area is obviously labour, and OPP and OPS pay rates are virtually identical, and while the local civilian workforce will be paid less, that will only be because most of their work will no longer be done locally.

All we really know is that all the uniformed officers will face the possibility of transfers to other parts of the province and that few of their replacements will have the familiarity with the community they serve that we find at present. Leadership of the policing team will be determined by OPP brass at the Orillia headquarters.

It remains to be seen whether there is any realistic possibility of someday resurrecting a local police force, or following Peel, Halton and York by forming a county force. But we don't know of any such change in recent years.

Historians will no doubt examine closely just how it could be that in a single year two neighbouring towns could have taken such opposite courses, with Shelburne Council voting 7-0 to retain its local police force and their Orangeville counterparts voting 6-1 to oust the OPS when everyone seemed to agree that the only advantage would be in tax savings.

Perhaps more attention ought to have been given to the OPP's apparent refusal to provide what really was needed to back up the consultant's prediction of \$58 million in savings by 2036, namely a 25-year contract that would guarantee those savings.

As we see it, there's simply no way the OPP could make such a commitment, since everything will depend on provincial budgeting.

In that context, all we know is that the Ford government stands committed to reducing the budgetary deficits permitted by the Liberal governments over 15 years, and one need not look beyond the current impasse over cuts to education funding to see how serious the Progressive Conservatives are about trimming expenses and reducing taxes.

It is known that this year the government trimmed \$40 million from its OPP budget, but we don't know whether Ford & Co. are even aware of the fact that provincial taxpayers are footing about one-third of the actual cost of having the OPP police urban municipalities. If this obvious incentive for cities and towns to rid themselves of local policing was official government policy, we don't know of that ever having been announced or confirmed.

It would be interesting, indeed, to find out just how much the government would save by leveling the playing field by requiring all recipient municipalities to pay the full cost of OPP policing in their jurisdictions. We suspect it could amount to hundreds of million dollars.

And while there's not a shadow of doubt that the OPP can provide effective local policing, or that in some cases local police forces are corrupt or inefficiently managed, we see it as ironic that neither seems to have been the case in Orangeville since Wayne Kalinski took over as police chief.

We wonder whether there will be the same level of attachment to the local community or involvement in community affairs that has been demonstrated so effectively by Chief Kalinski and his officers.

We guess only time will tell.