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There?s one big unknown

EDITORIAL

DECISIONS THIS YEAR may or may not lead to all of Dufferin County being policed by the Ontario Provincial Police.

If that does happen, it won't be because of morale or discipline problems in the Orangeville and Shelburne police forces, which both currently enjoy great relationships with the communities they serve.

Rather, the decisions facing the two town councils will boil down to a simple matter of dollars and cents, with proponents of the OPP takeovers predicting savings to the tune of multiple millions of dollars, which they will argue will more than compensate for the lack of local control and inability to keep the best officers from leaving for other OPP detachments.

Although Orangeville Council has opted to engage a consultant to assist it in making the decision, we're left wondering just how much any consultant will be able to accomplish beyond perhaps reporting back on the experience of other towns and villages that have turfed their local police forces in favour of the OPP.

As we see it, at the end of the day the towns' two police chiefs and the forces they command will be praised to the hilt but told the towns' taxpayers simply cannot afford the luxury involved in retaining local police forces.

The reason given will be based on an existing situation under which successive provincial governments of all political stripes have paid a large share of the actual cost of having the provincial force police urban areas.

That, after all, is the only reason the OPP can offer any significant cost savings, since virtually all the costs involved are identical, be it officers' wages and benefits or the vehicles and other equipment required by a modern police force.

However, one thing has changed since the OPP first presented Orangeville Council with a proposed contract covering the initial years of the transfer to OPP control.

Back in the summer of 2017 when the previous Orangeville Council voted 4-3 to retain the Orangeville Police Service, Ontario had long been government by Liberal premiers Dalton McGuinty and Kathleen Wynne, who both tended to favour new government services over cutting costs so as to balance the provincial budgets.

Since then, the Liberals have been turfed from office and replaced by a Progressive Conservative government that is determined to balance the books without any new taxes, and has been looking almost everywhere to find additional savings.

Although the Ford government has chopped $46 million this year from the OPP's budget, the government estimates show the cut coming only from ?field and traffic services,? and a spokesman for the government says no one will lose their jobs. Speaking as Solicitor-General, Dufferin-Caledon MPP Sylvia Jones said she has faith that the OPP leadership will be able manage challenges within the new budget.

Is the Ford government aware of the fact that cities and towns currently being policed by the OPP are paying only one-half to two-thirds the actual cost of providing the service?

If it isn't, we wonder how long it will be before all municipal policing contracts are brought in line with actual costs, at a saving to the provincial taxpayers of many millions of dollars.

There's little doubt that Orangeville and Shelburne would be protected from such sharp increases in policing costs for the duration of their original contracts. But eventually the towns' taxpayers could find themselves paying just as much as they now are for policing,

but lacking the advantages currently enjoyed through having popular, capable town police forces whose officers know their commuities.

Some food for thought.