

NEWS

Amalgamation brought benefits to Brighton and Cramahe councils

Efficiencies found in communications and in streamlined operations

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If the goal of amalgamation was to save time and money in the municipalities of Brighton and Cramahe, consider the operation a qualified success.

Two years after amalgamation took effect, things appear to be running efficiently and slightly cheaper, with few complaints from taxpaying citizens in either community. More importantly to taxpayers, there has been little or no increase in taxes as a result of amalgamation.

"I guess when you put the whole thing in a pot, the best way for me to measure it is that we didn't have to increase our tax rate. That's really the measure of success," said Brighton mayor Lou Rinaldi.

Rural Cramahe residents had a tax increase, while citizens of the village of Colborne experienced a decrease. Mayor Jim Williams said he heard very little about the changes.

"People understood. It wasn't a large increase in the first year. It was probably about two per cent. The village of Colborne went down about one per cent," he said.

For the municipality of Brighton, the change was much simpler than other regions in Ontario. Before voluntarily amalgamating, the two areas shared the responsibilities of providing a fire department, parks and recreation and building officials. That meant there were already clear lines of communication in place when it came to providing the remaining services like public works and administration.

"To be honest, the two municipalities were sharing

a number of services anyway. There were only a couple of areas that were not joint," said Don O'Neill, chief administrative officer for the municipality of Brighton.

"We were tripping over each other anyway," says Rinaldi.

Both mayors feel they are able to deliver an equal or higher level of service for less cost in all facets of the municipalities. In fact, not much has changed at all. For instance, in the first year of amalgamation, Brighton used the exact same personnel and routes to remove snow from the roads, said Rinaldi.

But what are the advantages of amalgamation? Are there any disadvantages? What are the cost savings? Where do the efficiencies lie?

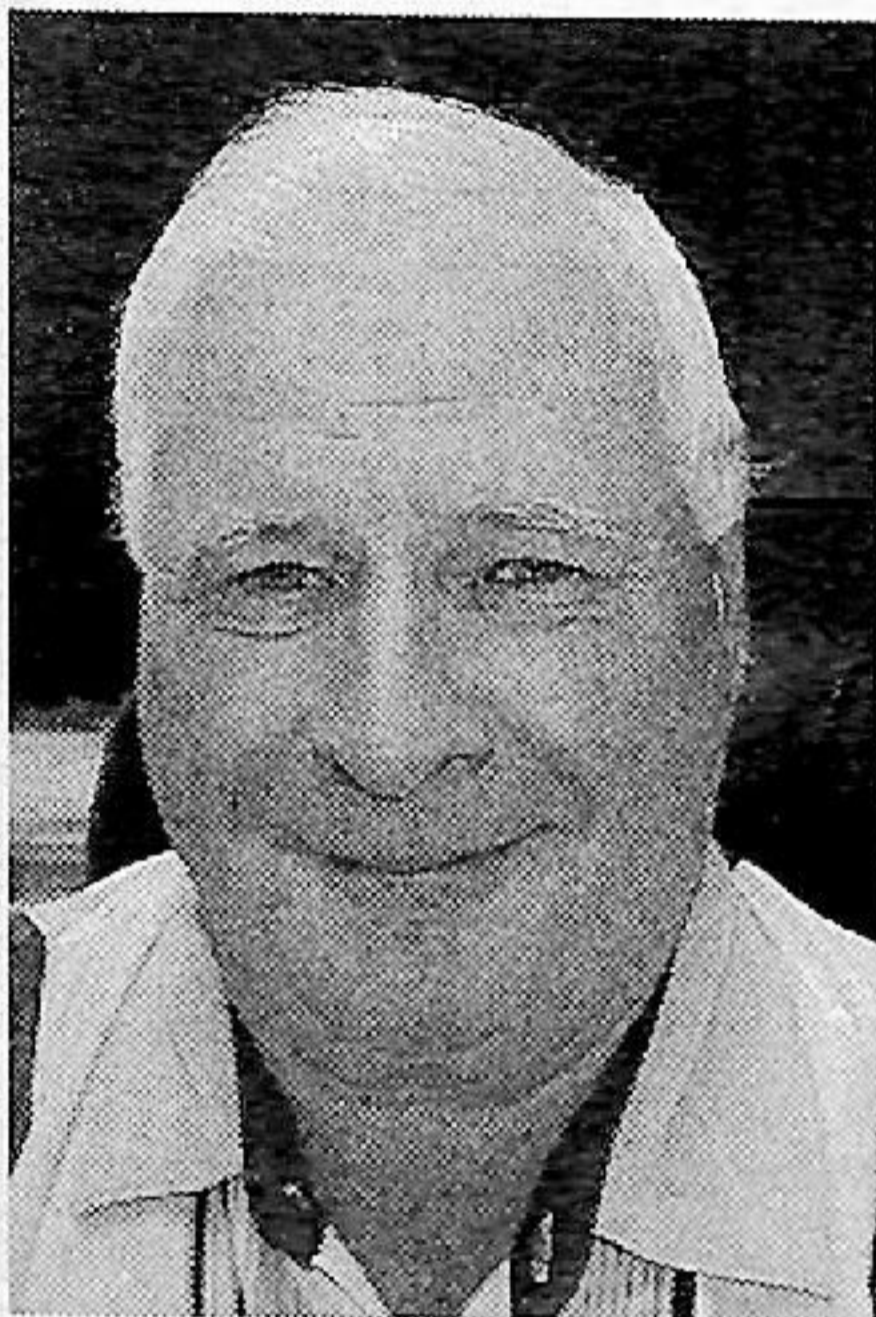
Primarily, the goal of amalgamation is to streamline the bureaucratic processes, said O'Neill. Fewer elected officials means decisions tend to be made quicker. Brighton reduced council strength from 12 to 7 members. In Cramahe, council has been reduced by half.

Williams feels that having all members of council involved in all facets of the township gives perspective. After amalgamation, things became easier because there was only one council and very few committees. The ease of communication makes projects easier, he said.

"It's a lot more work for individual members of council, but there are certainly efficiencies there - efficiencies in communication and in terms of having an overall perspective. If you tend to work by committee, you don't really

know what's going on. It is hard to get the overall perspective," said Williams.

Amalgamation has meant revenues are pooled in the treasury of one local government. This has allowed the municipalities



Don O'Neill

to take on more major tasks by budgeting for particular projects out of the total revenues. Where a road project might have taken two years to finance before amalgamation, now municipalities can afford to take on the project all at once.

"We're able to do larger projects now. For example, we're spending more money in our summer road construction than we have done for some time," said Williams.

In studies conducted by the provincial government since the beginning of 2001, most Ontario communities reported that they encountered very few difficulties in the areas of collective agreements, water and sewer issues, realignment of property taxes, or the increased workload on smaller councils as a result of amalgamations.

While some studies suggested smaller governments were "unprofessional and inefficient," and "viewed as a source of weakness that would prevent coordina-

tion," others defended the position of some local governments that not all services "possessed economies of scale," making it necessary for a higher level of government to underwrite those costs.

Both mayors said there are little savings as a result of amalgamation, because there is no real change in actual makeup of the townships ... only in the boundary lines on a map. The costs remain the same to run them. Naturally, there were fluctuations in costs, but they generally equaled out, said Rinaldi. For instance, there were cost savings when Brighton realized they had three backhoes after amalgamation.

The village of Brighton, the township of Brighton and public utilities each had their own. The newly amalgamated Brighton decided to sell one.

However, there were costs associated with amalgamation as well. The increased labour force meant the municipality fell under different employment regulations.

This resulted in a significant increase in payroll, Rinaldi said.

"Basically, the same faces, the same numbers. But because of the pay equity exercises we had to go through, our payroll increased by \$100,000," he said.

In the end, amalgamation has had little impact on the communities of Brighton and Cramahe. While the processes are more efficient, there are little savings to be had for the taxpayers of Brighton and Cramahe.

"Basically, we provide the same services, some of them enhanced, for the same rate as before amalgamation," said Rinaldi.