

Restructuring biggest change in Oxford since Baldwin Act

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Free Press Woodstock Bureau

WOODSTOCK — The restructured Oxford County government system which went into effect Wednesday marks the greatest change in county structure since the 1849 Baldwin Act established county boundaries.

But this time the architects of the system were local officials working with local input from public meetings.

Study of the need for municipal reform began in 1963 and moved several stages before the restructuring plan was approved in June.

Oxford's restructuring is the first in Ontario.

Warden Percy Sibbick, reeve of Blenheim Township, described it as "one of the biggest decisions in the history of Oxford County."

As of Wednesday 18 municipalities have been reduced to eight. Woodstock and Ingersoll have retained their boundaries while Tillsonburg has expanded into Dereham Township. Fifteen rural municipalities have merged into five townships. Zorra Township has been created in the northwest, East Zorra-Tavistock Township in the north-central area, Blandford-Blenheim Township in the northeast, Norwich Township in the southeast and the fifth is South-West Oxford Township.

Gerald Staples, county clerk-treasurer, said the restructured government is similar to regional government in some aspects but

there is no change in Oxford's status as a county.

He noted that restructuring was requested by the county rather than being imposed by the province. He also said the head of the county was appointed by county councillors and not by the province as has occurred when regional governments were established in other areas of Ontario.

Under restructuring, the county is responsible for planning, land severances, water and sewer services — which the county may contract to municipalities — capital financing, day-care services, waste disposal and a police liaison committee.

The county will also operate the library system, an inspection department and promotion of the county as an agricultural, industrial, business, education, residential and vacation centre.

First steps toward government restructuring were taken in 1963 when work began on the Lancelot Smith report on taxation. When it was released in 1967, it outlined a blueprint for creation of 29 regions by juggling boundaries.

Under that proposal, Oxford was to be included in a proposed Talbot region with portions of Elgin, Norfolk and Middlesex counties.

Regional thinking was given a further shot in the arm in 1968 with the release of the province's Design for Development which outlined plans for each region of the province. Its stated aim was to help establish

regional governments "to make local government as strong and meaningful as possible."

Then, in 1970, Warden Stanley Gehring, reeve of Norwich Township, urged Oxford County council to attempt to preserve its boundaries before implementation of regional government. Later in 1970, county council established a committee to prepare a report on regional government.

That same year, Woodstock and Ingersoll entered into discussions on restructuring with the county and Brian Turnbull and Associates of Kitchener was hired to present a report on restructuring.

Five alternatives were outlined. These ranged from retention of the status quo by leaving all matters in the hands of individual local governments to the creation of a one-tier government for the entire county.

Public meetings on the proposals were held in eight centres.

At one stage, it was proposed that neighboring parts of Elgin, Norfolk and Perth counties be included in the restructured county but this never came about.

On several occasions, the plan for restructuring also came close to being sidetracked. In 1973, county council rejected a motion that plans for restructuring be scrapped. And just before the provincial government approved the restructuring bill last June, a group of county residents appealed without success to the government to reject the bill.

North Oxford reeve plans to run for mayor of new municipality

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INGERSOLL — Reeve Hartwell Baigent of North Oxford Township announced Tuesday he will run for mayor of the new rural municipality in the northwest of Oxford.

At the same time, North Oxford Coun. James N. Muterer will seek a councillor-at-large seat in the Oct. 7 election.

East Nissouri Township, West Zorra Township, Embro and North Oxford are merging Jan. 1, 1975.

Reeve Baigent, vice-chairman of county council's finance committee, said:

"During the past four years, I have gained a thorough knowledge of the proposed restructured municipal system.

"It is my feeling that eight years as councillor and two as reeve in the township of North Oxford, qualifies me with enough knowledge and experience to help inaugurate a strong new council, capable of providing better service, more efficiently to the public, at no more increased cost than normal inflation dictates."

Deputy Reeve Muterer said:

"I was against the restructuring but now that it is here we are going to have to make it work."

The new area, he said, will require experienced people to keep costs down.

A two-year veteran of Oxford County council, he is in his eighth year on North Oxford council. He is a member of county council's property and administration committee.