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Manifest destiny?

Every six weeks or so we hear renewed mumbings (or is that grumblings?) about county restructuring and regional government.

According to one line of thinking, county residents should be outraged that their elected representatives collectively number 51 and continue to participate in an antiquated, upper-tier level of government known as Essex County council. Implicit in the argument is the suggestion that Windsor city council exemplifies the

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pared-down, bare bones, economical form of local government to which we should all aspire. If only that were true.

Having fewer elected representa-

tives does not guarantee better governance or increased cost savings. While Windsor city council may function with a mayor and 10 councillors, it employs over 3,300 workers. In contrast, the seven county municipalities and the Corporation of the County of Essex, representing a nearly equal population base, together employ nowhere near that number of workers. The Town of Essex, for example, employs about 50 full-time and 50 part-time workers, plus 36 police officers and staff. Which structure is really bloated?

Proponents of the regional governance model seem to think that county politicians are fearful of change and will go to great lengths to preserve the status quo. There may be some truth in that statement, but it's not without good reason.

When the province merged the county and city school boards in 1998, county trustees who had been effective leaders prior to amalgamation were repeatedly outvoted on issues of importance, both at the public board and at the Catholic board. Their voices were not heard and county needs were ignored.

A year later, the municipal amalgamation that promised greater efficiencies and economies of scale for seven larger municipalities was not without difficulties. In some municipalities, including Essex, political alliances formed early and predictable vote splitting left no doubt as to where the power lay. Politicians who should have been responsive to local concerns based their decisions on lines drawn in the sand. Tax savings as a result of amalgamation have been elusive.

County politicians have good reason to be cautious when talking about regional government. They have agreed to a restructuring review as a first step in assessing the effects of amalgamation and recently agreed to consider a shorter term of office for the warden. They have rejected calls for one regional government.

There is value in having a unified vision and a unified voice where some matters are concerned. Windsor and Essex County are already cooperating on several fronts including economic development. But when it comes to having control over your own destiny, why invite trouble?



Last Saturday the rains descended on Seacliff Park and the annual Leamington Tomato Festival. I noticed one of the volunteers standing in the downpour getting ready to start her event when the rain subsided. Wet work for no pay. But I wasn't surprised because in Essex County, its volunteers that make things happen.

Back in 1939, it was a volunteer committee in Amherstburg that saved Fort Malden from becoming a subdivision. Volunteers, headed by the Essex Kinsmen, raised the funds to build the Essex Memorial Arena in 1960. If this sounds familiar it's because they are doing the same thing 56 years later.

Volunteers drive cancer patients to Windsor for appointments. Volunteer participation was essential to the development of Raider Field, which enables Essex today to be home ground for the Essex Ravens football club that represents this part of Canada South so well.

In this day of government cutbacks and spending cuts, the role of the

volunteer has become increasingly important – whether they be associated with a service club (Optimist, Rotary, Lions),



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an organization like the Canadian Legion or Knights of Columbus, or serving on boards in support of causes like the Kidney Foundation, Heart and Stroke, a church committee . . . well, the list is endless.

With lifestyles so frantic and both parents working yet finding time to drive kids from one activity to another, the problem is that numbers of volunteers are declining. I don't know one organization in Essex County that could-

n't use more people. People attending meetings, working at events, attempting to meet the needs of the wider community are actually more important than money, because where volunteers go, the funding is sure to follow.

Essex is without peer when it comes to volunteerism. Whether it's the Fun Fest or the local schools, helping at the local food banks or a scouting camp-out, a weekend basketball tournament or selling daffodils for the Cancer Society, say hello to an Essex volunteer – an individual who cares about others more than oneself, and is willing to put valuable time on the line to make the community just a little bit better.

For more about volunteerism in Essex, come out to the Citizen of the Year Dinner honouring Ib Fynbo at Holy Name of Jesus Parish Hall on October 14. Helping the community is a point of pride, an example for youth, a beacon for a bright future. When the rain stops, the volunteer will still be there.



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