

# City of Vaughan 2024-25 Ward Boundary and Council Composition Review Backgrounder

## Discussion Paper B: What is the Optimal Size for a Municipal Council?

### Context

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Despite the long history of municipal institutions in Ontario, the premises and practices used for determining the overall composition of councils (size) has never been satisfactorily or definitively addressed, either in legislation or regulation. There are no clear principles at play, no “standards,” and no formulas to apply. Each municipality has its own history, its own traditions, and its own attributes. Furthermore, there is no established timetable to require that municipal councils review the continuing validity of the number of places at the council table.

The *Municipal Act, 2001* establishes the minimum size for the council of a local municipality in Ontario as five, “one of whom shall be the head of council” who must be elected by general vote (subsections 217 (1) 1 and (1) 3). There are no references to a maximum or to an “appropriate” size associated with, for example, the population of the municipality. This absence contrasts with the provisions of regulations issued under the *Education Act* (Ontario Regulation 412/00) which include a detailed formula to determine both the number of trustees and their distribution across each school board’s area of jurisdiction before each regular municipal election. As a result, the composition of local councils in Ontario varies widely. Vaughan’s Council is composed of 10 members, five above the minimum size.

When compared to other municipalities of comparable size in Ontario (Figure A below), Vaughan Council is smaller than all other municipalities on the list, except for Richmond Hill, which has eight council members (excluding the head of council). Vaughan’s Council is also smaller than its immediate comparators in terms of population (Markham and Kitchener). As a result, if there was a desire to increase the size of council, doing so would not make Vaughan an outlier in comparison to its immediate neighbours or comparators in population. In fact, doing so would bring the City in line with others of similar population sizes.



Figure A  
Population and Council Members across Comparable Ontario Municipalities

Municipality	2021 Population (Census) [A]	Composition of Council (Excluding the Head of Council) [B]	Population per Council Representative [C] = A/B
Toronto*	2,794,350	25	111,774
Ottawa*	1,017,450	24	42,394
Mississauga	717,960	11	65,269
Brampton	656,480	10 (5 Local, 5 Regional)	65,648
Hamilton*	569,350	15	37,957
London*	442,320	14	31,594
Markham	338,500	12 (8 Local, 4 Regional)	28,208
Vaughan***	323,100	9 (5 Local, 4 Regional)	35,900
Kitchener**	256,890	13 (10 Local, 3 Regional)	19,761
Windsor*	229,660	10	22,966
Oakville	213,760	14 (7 Local, 7 Regional)	15,269
Richmond Hill	202,020	8 (6 Local, 2 Regional)	25,253

\* Single-tier municipality.

\*\* Regional councillors do not sit on local Council.

\*\*\* Four regional councillors include the three local and regional councillors and the deputy mayor.

One item for consideration as well in regard to Table A is the number of “local” councillors – namely those who sit only on local council and do not represent the municipality on any regional council. Vaughan has five local councillors elected in five wards. This places them below their peers within York Region – Richmond Hill has 6 and Markham has 8, who are elected to represent wards in the City. Richmond Hill has a significantly lower population and Markham has only a slightly larger population, meaning that Vaughan has fewer local representatives than other municipalities of comparable size in York Region.



The present five-ward system has been in place since a 1994 Ontario Municipal Board order. In 2020, York Regional Council approved the addition of a fourth local and regional councillor from the City of Vaughan, a change that was put into effect for the 2022 municipal election. This composition is the status quo. Endorsing the continuation of this model with the current ward boundaries, however, should be seen as an option available to the City, just as much as a decision to elect a Council of a different size would be.

The legislative authority to determine the number of local councillors (*Municipal Act, 2001* section 217) rests with the municipal council and is distinct from the determination of the method by which they are to be elected (section 222).

The optimal size of a municipal council depends on the purpose and role council is expected to play as a decision-making and representative body. Three interconnected factors could be considered: the capacity of council to provide effective political management, responsiveness, and accountability.

**Effective Political Management:** A certain number of elected representatives are required to carry out the essential governmental functions of a municipality, but the workload undertaken by representatives varies with each individual councillor. In part, it will be driven by the personal preferences and commitment of individual councillors with a large element the result of the range of responsibilities that the municipality undertakes and the way it conducts its business. The amount of time spent on council business is not easily quantified but serving on a council is not a “9-to-5” job. How much material must councillors review and understand before participating effectively in council decision-making? How much constituency casework is directed to councillors? What committees, agencies, or other bodies do councillors participate in or chair? The size of the council has an impact on the amount of time individual councillors can allocate to such formal duties and to casework, in addition to their personal, family, and non-political obligations.

**Responsiveness:** The heart of “effective representation” (to be discussed more fully in relation to the guiding principles for a ward system – see Discussion Paper D) is the conviction that councillors must be able to maintain contact with constituents, primarily thought of as those who reside in the electoral district where the councillor is elected. The basic question in this context is whether the present council composition has an impact on the capacity of councillors to act as an intermediary between residents and the municipality. [1]

Logically, the larger the council, the more likely such connections can be maintained since residents have more councillors to contact and there are more councillors to

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[1] Note: this is not a comment on the performance of incumbent councillors, but rather a question about the reasonable expectations associated with being an elected (part-time) representative in the present configuration.



gather information across the relatively large geographic area of Vaughan. Conversely, the smaller the council, the greater the challenge to deliver such representation successfully. Although councillors are elected to serve the entire municipality – as reflected in the oath of office they take – at election time local councillors are associated with only a part of the municipality and their electoral success may hinge on how well they are thought to have been “responsive” to that part of the municipality.

**Accountability:** Municipal councillors are not only “political managers” of the municipal corporation but are accountable for their decisions through an election. A democratic electoral system should provide voters with an adequate range of opportunities to select municipal legislators: if, as the adage has it, municipal government is “closest to the people,” the number of representatives subject to public accountability for their actions is a key indicator of how close or remote the council is to the community.

Considering these three perspectives will provide insights for considering the optimal size of the municipal Council in Vaughan.

## **Preliminary Insights into the Composition of Vaughan’s Council**

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In Discussion Paper C, three components of the present council structure are described: the mayor, the deputy mayor and the city and regional councillors, and city councillors, adding up to a 10-member Council. The most basic question to ask at the outset is, “is 10 the right number?”

Examining the composition of council is part of the mandate for the Consultant Team. Through the various evaluative exercises that will be undertaken as part of the Ward Boundary Review, the Consultant Team may identify how alternative council compositions would align with the objectives of the Review. Given, however, that the size of council is smaller than most comparable municipalities, it is possible that the number of council members may require adjustment. In subsequent papers, the Consultant Team will delve further into this question.

## **Topical Discussion Papers A to D**

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- Discussion Paper A – Vaughan’s Electoral System
- Discussion Paper B – What is the Optimal Size for a Municipal Council?
- Discussion Paper C – The Component Parts of Vaughan Council
- Discussion Paper D – Guiding Principles to Design Wards