

What Can We Learn From Waterloo

The Region of Waterloo population (530,000) is only slightly larger than the approximate commuter range population of Southern Vancouver Island (450,000). Like Victoria it is also a “college town” with over 50,000 students.

And similarly it would seem that like Victoria, dwarfed by its neighbors of Seattle and Vancouver, that Waterloo is overshadowed by Metro Toronto and Ottawa. Waterloo competes well and has been recently been in the news for several reasons; most notably:

[On October 13, 2020 the Globe and Mail ran an article to confirm that the Waterloo region, otherwise known as the “Tri Cities”, and despite being a mid-sized urban area, punches well above its weight as a center of “*innovation*”. Recent economic information reports significant growth in investment, employment and success in attracting “*tech talent*”. It is the Ontario equivalent to Victoria as a growing center for a place in the modern world of technology and medical research. Their Kitchener-Waterloo corridor urban core has seen major expansion of office and research facilities providing several thousand new jobs.

[Coincidentally in spring 2019 the region became the smallest “non- metro” area in Canada to provide residents with rapid transit service! A new 19 km ION rapid transit and 16 km of rapid bus system to connect its 3 cities of Kitchener, Cambridge and Waterloo with their 3 “downtowns”, hospitals, shopping centers and 3 major college/universities. This project was the outcome of comprehensive Regional plan (2013) a “*Community Building Strategy*” as the basis to secure matching Federal-Provincial funding contributions. A remarkable achievement that now provides over 19 million annual trips.

Given this success there is merit in examining the key features of this most successful of 7 similar “metro” regional districts in southern Ontario established in 1973. (Others include York, Dufferin, Peel, Durham and Halton)

[The major metro areas; Toronto, Ottawa and Hamilton are single tier municipalities. The former Hamilton- Wentworth Region was dissolved and amalgamated as single tier City of Hamilton with council elected on ward basis.]

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A quick glance; in 1973 Province of Ontario established 7 Regional Municipalities with objectives to (1) co-ordinate planning (2) overcome duplication of services (3) provide fair and equal levels of service and (4) to protect citizens.

[Note: all of which should be similar motivation to require notable changes for the Capital Region of B.C. as identified in matching background paper “*Municipal Government in Capital Region Designed for the Past Rather Than the Future*”. Prepared by JD Anderson January 2021]

The new Region of Waterloo saw 15 towns and township reduced to seven: 3 cities of **Cambridge** (129,000), **Waterloo** (104,000) and **Kitchener** (232,000) and 4 rural townships. (65,000).

[Note: Cambridge is composite of earlier merger of Galt, Hespler and Prescott, and the adjacent rural areas have also been consolidated over time]

A Regional Board of 16 members includes the Regional Chair and 8 Councilors (4+2+2) elected on **regional ward basis** plus membership of the 7 mayors.

Like the Capital Regional District (CRD), it has responsibility for basic regional scale services; water supply and waste management. However in Ontario the mandate of the Waterloo Region is much broader than a typical Regional District in BC and includes rural library, emergency planning, community housing, airport and particularly regional policing and transit.

[Note: although not pertinent to this paper (nor recommended) the Region also serve as Regional Health Board because Province of Ontario assigns delivery of health and social services to the local government but funded by transfers not property taxes. This also includes local courts and ambulance service.]

The 7 local municipal governments are still responsible for delivery of local services, local streets, fire, libraries, parks and garbage and tax collection.

Concurrently the region does have history of numerous inter-municipal co-operation i.e. integrated fire dispatch, election equip and services, rural libraries

The region is not a perfect model and does have some shortcomings. The 3 cities and 4 townships still operate as political entities with separate building bylaws and zoning and support 6 library units and 7 fire departments with 59 elected officials. With separate assessment and tax rolls.

But it does demonstrate that a blended model of governance that reflects “**polycentric**” *regional realities* rather than historical pattern of multiple local municipal enclaves, they can accomplish much in terms or effective regional scale regional infrastructure, municipal works and social service delivery, integrated transportation system and economic development.

[Note in 2019 the Province of Ontario began a major review of regional government and quickly determined NOT to introduce further reforms. In particular two cities Cambridge and Mississauga had argued for independent single tier city status.]

{Prepared by J D Anderson; resident of Saanich} - January 2021