

Death by a thousand cuts

Wollaston Township Reeve Graham Blair and Councillor Bob Ireland made an important point during their recent meeting with their new Liberal Member of Parliament Mike Bossio during his inaugural visit to their municipality seeking their wisdom.

"We feel that we are left out of small communities funding grants," said Blair.

"We feel that our needs are not noticed," said Ireland.

On the face of it, the province's Infrastructure Funding for Small Communities program, with the federal government as a partner, sounds like just the thing they need to address the municipal infrastructure deficit. Almost every municipality struggles with that these days.

"Ontario plans to invest more than \$130 billion in public infrastructure over the next 10 years," enthuses the Ontario government website. "This would support more than 110,000 jobs on average each year in construction and related industries."

Every North Hastings municipality could use some of that. But the devil is in the details.

According to the website, municipalities located in rural and northern Ontario are eligible to apply, but it is interesting how the criteria defines a small community: "has a population of less than 100,000."

Most small cities in Ontario will fit those criteria. Wollaston has 711 permanent residents at last count. Other municipalities in North Hastings have a few more, or a few less than that. I am quite sure that any city with over 100,000 population has a direct line to the premier's or prime minister's office. John Tory (Toronto's mayor) speaks casually about those calls.

Our little municipalities have one or two administrative staff, to whom falls the gargantuan task of preparing a complex application covering dozens of pages. Municipalities of 100,000 have experts on staff for just such an endeavour. But we will try to muddle through that part on short notice too.

What is the infrastructure deficit composed of in small North Hastings municipalities? Such things as roads department buildings, salt sheds, functional office space, library, fire department equipment and building, deteriorating roads and bridges, impending landfill closure costs, well, it's a long list.

One look at the list of eligible projects, and hope quickly turns to gloom: major highways and bridges with huge traffic counts; wastewater and drinking water, solid waste management, local or regional airport facilities, short line rail, and short sea shipping.

Not one service provided by any municipality in North Hastings save and except for Bancroft's water and sewer

Too small I guess. Should we be advocating for a "Funding for Tiny Little Communities" program? Looks that way. I know, some will be saying that that these little places have got to go, and be replaced by larger municipal boundaries and less government.

Former Wollaston Reeve Dan McCaw often said: "they don't want us here. They want to get rid of us little places."

In the 1990s, Mike Harris brought us the "Common Sense Revolution" with a promise to amalgamate municipalities into big ones, less bureaucracy, reduce waste and lower taxes.

Even the Fraser Institute (a right-wing conservative think tank) admits the confrontational exercise was a failure. In their 2015 report entitled: "Municipal Amalgamation in Ontario" it sums up by saying that while the goal was laudable, it actually resulted in increased property taxes and public sector employee compensation. "In the long term, no tangible benefit was reached," it said.

The reason? "The speed at which it was implemented, and too many hasty decisions," the report concluded.

Is it possible that Dan McCaw could be right? A slow death by a thousand cuts, choking the "tiny" municipalities?

Bossio represents the riding of Hastings-Lennox and Addington, which contains not one single city. He has said that he is committed to the creation of a rural caucus for a bigger voice, and the revival of rural entrepreneurship and sustainable growth. He might have his hands full.

- Jim Eadie