

# Bob Gale may be gone, but Niagara's governance battle isn't over

Regional council is moving ahead with a service delivery review, but changes to municipal structures across the province may be on the Ontario government's radar.

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## Residents pack Niagara Region's council chamber in Thorold.

Bob Tymczyszyn/St. Catharines Standard file photo



By [Bill Sawchuk](#) Reporter

Bob Gale may be gone, but regional council isn't finished with governance reform.

Councillors approved a motion put forth by Fort Erie Mayor Wayne Redekop Thursday that begins with sending Niagara Region chief administrative officer Ron Tripp to meet with his lower-tier colleagues.

The CAOs are expected to help initiate a review of Niagara's two-tiered system with an eye toward eliminating duplication and improving service efficiency, based on data, a business case with financial analysis and public consultation, commencing this term of council.

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The motion includes the option to hire outside assistance. Tripp is to report back to council no later than its next regular meeting on April 30.



Fort Erie Mayor Wayne Redekop.  
Bob Tymczyszyn/St. Catharines Standard file photo

“We know that this is of some importance to the province, and I think we need to take some active steps in the direction that they want us to go, but until such time as we have something from the CAOs, I don’t know that there’s much for us to go to the public about,” Redekop said.

“I personally have not formulated a plan going forward. I know what the broader strokes might look like, but I haven’t made a determination on that yet.”

The motion also directs regional staff to “co-operate fully” with local municipalities and share regional data as requested by them and anyone engaged to assist in the governance and services review.

That part of the motion may be a nod to rumours of a strong division among CAOs during a previous meeting.

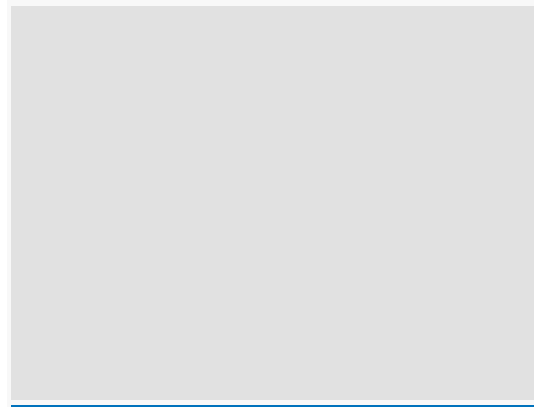
Council had recommended approving Redekop’s original motion during a committee of the whole meeting on Feb. 26. /during Thursday’s meeting, councillors amended it to remove a section that directed then-chair Gale to refrain from further actions on governance reform or possible amalgamations.

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Gale aggressively pursued restructuring during his brief tenure as chair from December to March after being appointed by the provincial government, and

described Niagara's current system of governance as dysfunctional and "over-bloated" with 126 municipal politicians.

Gale resigned on March 11 over his ownership of an autographed copy of Adolf Hitler's "Mein Kampf," but not before suggesting shrinking the number of municipal councillors by 35, with 16 cuts from lower-tier councils and 19 from the Region. Gale's plan included limiting regional council to the 12 mayors, using a weighted voting formula to maintain population-based representation.



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COLUMNISTS

OPINION

### **A weighted Niagara government heavily favours largest cities**

Multiple sources close to the provincial government said forced amalgamations are off the table, but legislation headed to the legislature in early April would enable the province to determine municipal composition. Changes won't be limited solely to Niagara and could include amendments to the Municipal Elections Act.

The announcement is expected to include the change to a mayors-only regional council in Niagara.

One of the sources said the plan needed cabinet approval, and is scheduled to be introduced on April 2, Thursday. The legislature normally doesn't meet on

Fridays, and that date is likely the final sitting before a scheduled 10-day break.

The timing of any provincial announcement is key because nominations for the fall municipal elections open May 1, the first day residents can register to run for mayor, municipal council or for school board trustee.

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St. Catharines Mayor Mat Siscoe delivers the annual state of the city address at Club Roma in St. Catharines.

Julie Jocsak/St. Catharines Standard

That information aligns with what St. Catharines Mayor Mat Siscoe said during his state of the city address on March 25.

“I don’t think anybody, elected official or not, wants to encounter a situation where May 1 comes, and people start to register for an election, and then changes happen. I think that’s a worst-case scenario.”

Siscoe also said he believes amalgamation is off the table.

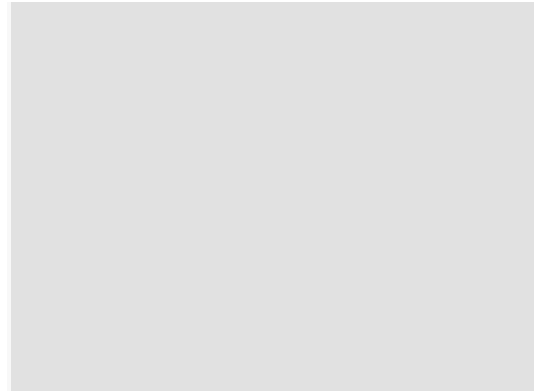
“I think that issue has died,” Siscoe said. “The rumour mill abounds across southern Ontario, and what I’ve heard most recently is that if there are any changes that come, they will be changes to all the regions as opposed to just one. I could be wrong; it is a rumour mill after all.”

There are other two-tiered municipalities that could also be on the province's reform radar, including:

- Durham Region, with eight lower-tier municipalities, including Oshawa, Whitby and Ajax.
- Halton Region, with four lower-tier municipalities, including Burlington, Oakville, Milton and Halton Hills.
- Waterloo Region, with seven lower-tier municipalities, including Kitchener, Waterloo and Cambridge.
- York Region, with nine lower-tier municipalities, including Markham, Vaughan and Richmond Hill.
- Oxford County, which is legally defined as a regional municipality that provides services for eight local municipalities, including Woodstock, Ingersoll and Tillsonburg.
- District Municipality of Muskoka, which provides upper-tier services for six lower-tier municipalities, including Bracebridge, Gravenhurst and Huntsville.

The province announced in 2023 it would dissolve Peel Region into Mississauga, Brampton and Caledon, but scrapped the plan last year, citing potential tax hikes and disruptions to essential services such as policing and public health.

The province also enacted a major boundary adjustment last December, transferring nearly 4,100 acres of land from Springwater and Oro-Medonte townships into the City of Barrie.



Port Colborne Coun. Vance Badawey.  
Julie Jocsak/St. Catharines Standard file photo

Port Colborne Coun. Vance Badawey told regional council successful reform in Niagara depends on a well-supported, evidence-based and collaborative process, which “ensures decisions are well-founded, sustainable and reflective of the best interests of the communities that we serve.”

“This is about more than a process,” Badawey said. “It’s about public trust and maintaining that trust requires us to move forward in a way that is transparent, disciplined and firmly rooted in evidence.”