

March 10 Meeting - Summary

1. Regional Governance & Amalgamation Discussion

A significant portion of the meeting focused on concerns regarding potential municipal restructuring or amalgamation in the Niagara Region.

Key points raised:

- There is skepticism about the rationale for amalgamation, with participants questioning whether it would actually produce meaningful financial efficiencies.
- Estimates suggest efficiencies would be minimal compared to the region's infrastructure deficit, which may require approximately \$100 million annually to address.
- Concerns were expressed that the amalgamation process may function as a political distraction rather than a solution to larger fiscal issues.
- Participants discussed the possibility of reduced council representation, potentially shifting decision-making power toward a smaller group of mayors.
- A weighted voting system was discussed as a possibility, which could lead to larger municipalities dominating regional decision-making and reducing representation for smaller communities like Niagara-on-the-Lake.

Overall concern:

The proposed governance changes could reduce democratic representation and local influence while failing to address underlying financial issues.

2. Shared Services & Regional Efficiency

Participants discussed ways the region could improve efficiency without restructuring.

Examples raised:

- Shared service systems between municipalities (such as finance or software platforms) could reduce costs.
- The region currently operates multiple overlapping systems, suggesting opportunities for consolidation.
- A collaborative regional service model may deliver better results than full amalgamation.

The takeaway was that practical cooperation may achieve savings without altering governance structures.

3. Tourism Strategy Review

The committee reviewed the Niagara-on-the-Lake Tourism Strategy and Action Plan. Observations included:

Strengths

- Strong tourism economy with established assets:
 - wine region
 - heritage identity
 - rural character
 - cultural institutions (e.g., Shaw Festival)

Key concerns

- The strategy appears business and tourism growth focused, with limited emphasis on resident quality of life.
- Infrastructure pressures were noted, including:
 - parking
 - housing for tourism workers
 - seasonal visitor surges.
- Approximately 5,000-7,000 tourism support workers enter the town daily, highlighting housing and infrastructure pressures.

Participants noted the plan lacks a clear vision statement that distinguishes Niagara-on-the-Lake from other destinations.

4. Governance Structure of Local Tourism

The meeting clarified the structure of tourism leadership.

Key organizations:

1. NIAGARA-ON-THE-LAKE TOURISM (DMO)

- Official destination marketing organization
- Funded through the Municipal Accommodation Tax (MAT)
- Responsible for marketing, visitor services, and tourism promotion.

2. TOWN OF NIAGARA-ON-THE-LAKE

- Oversees infrastructure and tourism policy
- Receives half of MAT funding for infrastructure.

3. CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

- Represents local business interests.

Regional partners

- Tourism Partnership of Niagara
- Niagara Region Economic Development.

A key observation was that organizational roles are complex and sometimes overlapping, which can create confusion around accountability and communication.

5. Lack of Resident Input in Tourism Planning

One of the strongest themes of the meeting was the absence of formal mechanisms for resident participation in tourism planning.

Concerns raised:

- Residents are not clearly involved in shaping tourism policy.
- Communication from tourism organizations is primarily marketing oriented rather than community oriented.
- There is no structured feedback system for residents.

Participants emphasized that tourism policy should balance visitor growth with community wellbeing.

6. Comparison to Prince Edward County

Prince Edward County was discussed as a successful model for tourism management.

Key differences:

Prince Edward County:

- Focuses on managed growth and over tourism prevention
- Uses regular resident surveys
- Has public consultation mechanisms
- Created a dedicated Resident Voice tourism portal.

Their mission prioritizes quality of life for residents alongside tourism development. The committee suggested this could serve as a model for Niagara-on-the-Lake.

7. Proposed Next Steps

The group agreed on a collaborative approach rather than confrontation.

Initial actions discussed:

1. Request a short meeting (approx. 15 minutes) with the tourism board.
2. Raise the topic of resident input mechanisms.
3. Propose simple tools such as:
 - public consultation processes
 - community surveys
 - online resident feedback portal.
4. Emphasize that the association supports sustainable tourism, not anti-tourism positions.

The objective is to open a constructive dialogue with tourism leadership.

8. Communication Strategy

Members noted the need for clearer communication with residents.

Suggestions included:

- Using visual materials and graphics instead of long documents.
- Providing simplified summaries of complex issues such as amalgamation and tourism policy.
- Ensuring messaging avoids appearing anti-tourism while still advocating for community balance.

9. Additional Notes

- A tourism update presentation from Niagara-on-the-Lake Tourism is expected at town council in March.
- The group plans to review the presentation once available.

Two Key Ideas from Prince Edward County

(Highlighted by Michael)

1. Formal Resident Consultation in Tourism Planning

Prince Edward County built resident consultation directly into their tourism strategy.

They use several mechanisms:

- Public consultation on tourism-related projects
- Regular resident surveys about tourism impacts
- Tourism planning that explicitly considers quality of life for residents

The principle is simple:

Tourism growth must be balanced with the needs and wellbeing of the people who live there.

Their tourism strategy is built around managed growth, not simply marketing more visitors.

Why this matters

In Niagara-on-the-Lake, tourism planning currently appears to be primarily business and marketing driven, with very limited formal mechanisms for residents to shape decisions.

Michael's point was that if residents are not included early, conflict inevitably appears later.

HOW THIS COULD BE IMPLEMENTED IN NIAGARA-ON-THE-LAKE

Establish a Resident Consultation Framework

NOTL could introduce a simple structure similar to Prince Edward County:

Possible tools:

- Annual resident tourism impact survey
- Public consultation for major tourism initiatives
- Community workshops or town halls on tourism planning

This would allow the town to say:

“Tourism decisions are informed by both visitor economy needs and resident quality of life.”

It also helps avoid reactive conflict when new projects are introduced.

2. Create a “Resident Voice” Input Channel

Prince Edward County created a dedicated platform for resident feedback on tourism. Michael specifically mentioned their “Resident Voice” mechanism, where residents can provide input on tourism policies and initiatives.

This gives residents a clear pathway to participate, rather than feeling excluded from decisions.

HOW THIS COULD BE IMPLEMENTED IN NOTL

NOTL could introduce something similar through:

A Resident Tourism Feedback Portal

This could be hosted through:

- the Town website
- Niagara-on-the-Lake Tourism website
- a joint portal between the town and the DMO.

The portal could include:

- resident surveys
- feedback forms on tourism initiatives
- reporting on tourism strategy progress
- updates on infrastructure and visitor management.

This would create transparency and participation, rather than decisions appearing top-down.

The Strategic Message (Important for your positioning)

Michael emphasized that this approach should be framed as:

Not anti-tourism.

Instead:

Supporting sustainable tourism that protects both the visitor economy and the quality of life for residents.

This collaborative tone is essential so that:

- businesses feel supported
- tourism organizations see residents as partners
- the town views the association as constructive rather than oppositional.