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**Official Report
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(Hansard)**

HE-41

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des débats
(Hansard)**

HE-41

**Standing Committee
on Heritage, Infrastructure
and Cultural Policy**

Regional governance

**Comité permanent du
patrimoine, de l'infrastructure
et de la culture**

Gouvernance régionale

1st Session
43rd Parliament

Wednesday 10 January 2024

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43^e législature

Mercredi 10 janvier 2024

Chair: Laurie Scott
Clerk: Isaiah Thorning

Présidente : Laurie Scott
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LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF ONTARIO

ASSEMBLÉE LÉGISLATIVE DE L'ONTARIO

**STANDING COMMITTEE ON HERITAGE,
INFRASTRUCTURE
AND CULTURAL POLICY**

**COMITÉ PERMANENT DU PATRIMOINE,
DE L'INFRASTRUCTURE
ET DE LA CULTURE**

Wednesday 10 January 2024

Mercredi 10 janvier 2024

The committee met at 1000 in Holiday Inn and Suites, St. Catharines.

The Clerk of the Committee (Mr. Isaiah Thorning): Good morning, honourable members. In the absence of the Chair and Vice-Chair, it is my duty to call upon you to elect an Acting Chair. Are there any nominations? MPP Rae.

Mr. Matthew Rae: Good morning. Happy new year. I would like to appoint MPP Grewal.

The Clerk of the Committee (Mr. Isaiah Thorning): MPP Grewal do you accept the nomination?

Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal: Yes, I do.

The Clerk of the Committee (Mr. Isaiah Thorning): Are there any further nominations?

Seeing none, I declare nominations closed and MPP Grewal elected Acting Chair.

REGIONAL GOVERNANCE

The Acting Chair (Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal): Good morning. The Standing Committee on Heritage, Infrastructure and Cultural Policy will now come to order. We're meeting in the city of St. Catharines to conduct public hearings on the study of regional governance.

Please wait until I recognize you before starting to speak. As always, all comments should be directed through the Chair. Are there any questions before we begin?

Mrs. Jennifer (Jennie) Stevens: Can I have some clarification on the agenda? Is this when I can put this forward?

The Acting Chair (Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal): Yes.

Ms. Sandy Shaw: I'd like some changes done. St. Catharines was spelled wrong. It's St. Catharines with an A, not with an E, so if we could correct that, as well as, it's the city of Niagara Falls, not the city of Niagara. Thank you.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal): Thank you. We'll definitely have those changes rectified.

REGION OF NIAGARA

CITY OF THOROLD

TOWN OF LINCOLN

The Acting Chair (Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal): Today's presenters have been scheduled in groups of

three, each for a one-hour timeslot with each presenter allotted seven minutes for an opening statement followed by 39 minutes of questioning for all three witnesses divided into two rounds of seven and a half minutes for government members, two rounds of seven and a half minutes for the official opposition members and two rounds of four and a half minutes for the independent member of the committee. Are there any questions regarding timing? MPP McMahon.

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: Can we extend that for the independent member?

Interjections.

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: Just joking, just joking.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal): Seeing no more questions, I'd like to call on the region of Niagara, the city of Thorold and the town of Lincoln. I'd like to ask if they could please take their seats and be prepared to make their witness statement.

I'd like to welcome Jim Bradley, the chair; the mayor for the city of Thorold, Terry Ugolini; and the mayor of the town of Lincoln, Sandra Easton. Welcome and thank you for being here today.

I'd like to start with Jim Bradley. You may now start. Please state your name for the record before you begin.

Mr. Jim Bradley: Good morning. I'm Jim Bradley, chair of the regional municipality of Niagara, accompanied by regional CAO Ron Tripp.

Today, I stand before you to share my own personal perspectives on the future of municipal governance in Niagara and its pivotal role in tackling the prevalent housing crisis. A recent examination showed that even with an annual income of \$85,000, home ownership remains elusive in Niagara, but as I have stated on numerous occasions, the Niagara region is committed to partnering with your government to address the housing crisis.

I also agree with Minister Calandra: This governance discussion should be on how a manipulation of governance would result in more homes being built. My comments today will be almost entirely focused on that goal.

But it is also important to learn from past experiences. Many long-term academic studies have demonstrated that the projected benefits of past amalgamations often failed to materialize, leading to the same outcomes, as if no changes have been made. On the other side of the coin, recent studies in Peel region regarding dissolution showed the potential for massive tax increases and instability if

dissolution is considered. And while there are many governance models being proposed, none of them are predicated on how they will build more homes.

There is not a single community in Ontario that doesn't struggle with the same challenges that we have in Niagara, and that includes those locations that were amalgamated in the late 1990s. The facts speak for themselves: Amalgamation or dissolution is not a silver-bullet solution to build more homes, tackle homelessness or even reduce administrative burdens.

All that being said, no system is perfect, and there is always room for improvement. I would respectfully suggest that a series of incremental changes could strengthen our region while avoiding governance experiments that would be costly and distract from our ultimate goal.

With over \$9 billion in assets, the Niagara region provides a coordinated approach and economy of scale. We deliver costly and complex essential services such as police, EMS, public health, housing, transit, long-term care, Ontario Works and waste collection, just to name a few of them.

The region also creates the opportunity to pool resources across Niagara to build the costly capital infrastructure that is needed to ensure all of our communities are growing equitably. While I believe in the autonomy and importance of our local communities, I also believe that the regional model allows our communities the opportunity to grow in ways that would be impossible otherwise.

A recent independent study by KPMG found that the region's property taxes as a percentage of household income are the lowest as compared to the other five upper-tier municipalities. Even with that distinction, we are at or above the provincial standards across all our lines of business. The same study found that 92% of our budget is dedicated to essential or provincially mandated programs.

This term of council has made the expansion of shared services across Niagara a top priority. I am pleased to share that we have recently invested in a specialized staff team that is solely focused on identifying opportunities for shared services that are most likely to save taxpayer money and optimize service delivery.

This team is making progress in many areas, including the unification of the chief building official services across Niagara. This move will ensure we are maximizing resources, interpreting the building code equitably across the region and, most importantly, expediting the construction of more homes.

As you know, Minister Calandra's request to this committee was to determine if current municipal structures are standing in the way of more homes being built. In response to that request, allow me to share some facts: We have 39,283 housing units already approved for development across Niagara. This equates to a 10-to-11-year supply of housing units. If the development community were to start work tomorrow, we would surpass our provincial housing targets by some 43%.

With over \$85 million in grants and incentives provided in the last five years, the region financially supported the

development industry more than any other place in Ontario. Before Bill 23 minimized our role, we met or exceeded provincial commenting deadlines 92% of the time. Since becoming chair, I cannot recall a single instance when the Niagara region demonstrated NIMBYism and blocked development in a specific community.

Niagara is also a financially competitive place to build homes. Development charges for a single-family dwelling in Niagara region are \$20,000 to \$30,000 less than our neighbouring communities of Hamilton and Halton region. I think the numbers speak for themselves. I believe that Niagara is a development-friendly community. And while there are challenges to ensure more homes are built, I can confidently say those hurdles are not a result of our governance structure.

To that end, there are many things we can do to build more houses:

(1) Senior levels of government must develop a new deal to close the infrastructure funding gap. For instance, we continue to seek funding partners for a new waste water treatment plant that, once completed, will allow thousands of new homes to be built.

(2) As delays can also happen at the provincial level, we ask that your government create an approvals facilitator or provincial chief planner to resolve conflicts among parties to expedite approvals. That would include different ministries.

(3) We suggest that the land tribunal appeal process be streamlined so the appellant is required to demonstrate that an appeal has merit before proceeding.

(4) We ask for the introduction of more provincial incentive programs to encourage the private sector to build more purpose-built and affordable rentals.

(5) And finally, we applaud Minister Calandra's stance on "use it or lose it" on MZOs. We ask that municipalities be given tools to help ensure that development happens in a timely fashion.

The administration of local government programs and infrastructure in Niagara is exceedingly complex. Pulling at the threads of the municipal tapestry without fully comprehending the entire system can have dire consequences not only on the delivery of municipal services, but also on the community's ability to build more homes. Once we start pulling on those threads, the entire system may start to unravel.

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I trust that the government is undertaking this committee process to ensure they're looking beyond the anecdotal and emotional, to start a conversation about how best to end this housing crisis. I would respectfully suggest that cautious consideration be taken before significant decisions are made which could cost taxpayers billions, destabilize the region and derail efforts to ensure everyone has a place that we call home.

I will welcome questions from the members of the committee at the appropriate time, Mr. Chair.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal): Thank you very much, Jim, for your presentation.

I'd like to move on to the mayor of the city of Thorold, Terry Ugulini.

Mr. Terry Ugulini: Thank you for the opportunity. We're going to have a slide show here, which may be hard for those people who are here today to follow. I'll be commenting on the slides, though, as we go along.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal): Mayor, before you begin, state your name for the record, please.

Mr. Terry Ugulini: My name is Terry Ugulini. I'm the mayor of the city of Thorold. Thank you for the opportunity to present here this morning before the Standing Committee on Heritage, Infrastructure and Cultural Policy regarding the regional governance study. With me today is our CAO, Manoj Dilwaria, and our director of development services, Jason Simpson, who's running the slide show. We are here today to present our position on the regional governance review, with the intention to focus on housing and cost-effective and efficient delivery of services.

The city of Thorold is the fourth-fastest-growing municipality in Ontario, the eighth-fastest-growing in Canada and, of course, the fastest-growing municipality in Niagara. A population increase of 26.7% was realized as per the last census. It is important to note that this growth is projected to continue for the foreseeable future. As the fastest-growing municipality in Niagara, we led all of Niagara in housing starts last year, with 658. The average annual number of new dwelling approvals over the last five years is 752 per year. If we would have been provided a housing target, we would have exceeded it by a significant amount. We are accomplishing all this while remaining fiscally responsible to our taxpayers, with one of the lowest annual average tax increases.

These slides show growth across the city. This isn't all, but this is some of the development. The beauty of the growth in the city of Thorold is that the different developments are occurring throughout the entire city and separated by the Welland Canal, the Lake Gibson corridor, the greenbelt and agricultural land, so we will never grow into ourselves; we will always have nice, distinct areas separated by green space.

Not only are we growing in the residential sector, but we're growing in the commercial and industrial sector as well. The Thorold Multimodal Hub has gained international attention and now is home to over 35 companies, with extensive development along McCleary Drive, the Brock district in the Schmon Parkway area, and along Allanport Road, as well as other areas within the city. The result of this growth is the creation of good-paying jobs and an increased tax base which, when combined with residential growth, will allow us to keep taxes at sustainable levels.

Regional services are required. Long-term infrastructure planning is critical to make sure we are prepared for the projected growth as we move forward, and the four-city model being floated around would not be able to provide the regional services shown in this slide as efficiently and cost-effectively.

What is being done? The city of Thorold is constantly evaluating and undergoing process changes to enhance efficiencies in all areas of development planning and approval. Removing land use planning approval functions from regional government and shifting all responsibility to local municipalities is a positive step.

There are many things that we're working on together—regional transit, obviously. The Welland Canal mayors working group is an important initiative to drive business opportunities and job growth along the Welland Canal trade corridor. And the CAOs working group to look for shared service opportunities and drive efficiency are just a few of the things we're working on.

Areas for continued focus: Continual review of services provided between upper and lower tiers to remove duplication, reviewing size of political representation at regional and local levels, as well as implementing housing targets for all municipalities are areas for continued focus.

In closing, I'll start with a quote from David Siegel, retired Brock University political science professor. He stated, "Right now, everybody has a solution—amalgamation. But then if you ask what problem are you trying to solve, they kind of look at you like a deer in the headlights, because they haven't thought it through." If the goal is saving money, "so far that hasn't happened."

Now I'll move on to some of my remarks: Changing the governance structure during a housing crisis would create uncertainty and slow down development approvals. The result: less houses being built. The province should evaluate and implement housing targets for all municipalities, or at least all those that want them. The city of Thorold would welcome the opportunity to be part of that program, as we are definitely punching above our weight and could relieve the pressure on some of the larger municipalities' targets. We will continue to work to drive efficiencies and reduce red tape in conjunction with our peers.

Reviewing the size of regional and local municipal councils is a worthwhile endeavour, but the message here today is: Let's continue our focus on building housing, continue to work to drive efficiencies and remove red tape utilizing the current two-tier model.

That's the end of my presentation.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal): Thank you very much, Mayor Ugulini.

I'd like to now move to the mayor for the town of Lincoln, Sandra Easton. Please state your name before you begin. Thank you.

Ms. Sandra Easton: Good morning, Mr. Chair and committee members. My name is Sandra Easton. I am the mayor of the town of Lincoln. I am very pleased to be here today to speak with you.

I think it's important to note that the mayors of West Lincoln and Grimsby and the mayor of Lincoln and our CAOs talked about us doing a joint presentation. It wasn't looked on favourably, and we certainly respect that, but it is an indication of the level of conversations that we've been having.

For several years here in west Niagara, we've worked towards and we've advocated for and incorporated changes to how we will deliver services.

Attending with me today are Mike Mikolic, who is the deputy mayor; our CAO, Michael Kirkopoulos; the chief planner, Matt Bruder; director of economic development, Paul Di Ianni; and our clerk, Julie Kirkelos. These are the people that get the work done. We have made many, many proactive initiatives, but it's clear that we need more assistance and guidance from senior levels of government.

I'm going to be talking about the commitment that we've made to shared services. Shared services, however, without a clear intent and expectation laid out by the government, will not survive. There's too many ways for people to back out of the agreements. There is, in some cases, a great deal of public pressure that comes forward because there are significant issues around ego—who does what, who is in charge—and all of these things, of course, get in the way of great progress.

We've also reviewed and discussed amongst our councils options for regional governance in Niagara, but I want to be very clear that we have not made any decisions. I have no direction from the town of Lincoln to move in any particular direction, and I think it is really quite premature to do such a thing. The point is that we're talking, and we see that there is value in working this through very logically and very carefully. Top of mind has always been better service delivery and timely decisions to ensure that government is working efficiently on behalf of taxpayers. The town of Lincoln has nurtured a culture of high productivity and customer service, and we will continue to do that.

One more specific purpose today is to shed light on the pressing need for a more integrated and co-operative approach to regional government, one that reflects the shared experiences and aspirations of our communities. Our comments centre around fostering stronger relationships between and amongst our towns, and should the province see it fit, we believe there could be a successful establishment of a new governance model for Niagara, and even a new entity in west Niagara. I am not suggesting one or four, but there are some logical relationships that aren't very difficult to figure out when you see how close our community is now.

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So I come before you not merely as the leader of an individual municipality, but as a steward of a vision that transcends borders, aiming to create a vibrant and cohesive west Niagara. Our experiences so far have demonstrated the power of collaboration in realizing essential projects that benefit our residents and enhance the overall quality of life in our region.

Let us begin by emphasizing the current successful shared endeavours in west Niagara that underscore the potential of a closer relationship between our towns and other municipalities in Niagara. Our unified efforts have played a pivotal role in supporting the establishment of the new hospital, a cornerstone of community well-being, and the region is in that project with us as well in terms of

funding, because there's always a considerable shortfall, I'm sad to say, from the provincial level. But we have no argument about the fact that we do have this hospital, and we thank our MPP for the work that he put toward that.

We've also contributed to the realization of a new high school, fostering education and growth for the next generation in west Niagara. A few of us have come together to deliver fire services and planning and development services. Further conversations around shared economic development and tourism are also under way, and they're moving rapidly forward. We just approved the destination-marketing organization model.

Additionally, our towns have actively participated in the creation of a shared fairgrounds, a testament to our commitment to preserving and celebrating our cultural heritage. And we have a shared history of joint infrastructure projects such as the development of water treatment and solid waste management, which now are the responsibility of the region. We have advocated jointly to senior levels of government for a new escarpment crossing.

These achievements exemplify the spirit of unity and co-operation that defines our collective approach to regional development.

We have a joint library project with the town of Pelham, and we have a joint hockey team called the Flying Aces. However—

Interjection.

Ms. Sandra Easton: I knew you would be interested in that, Jim.

However, we recognize that there's more work to be done, and the current Niagara and regional governance structure presents some challenges in efficiently delivering services and addressing the growing need for housing in our communities.

We believe that forming a more integrated service delivery model can further streamline the decision-making processes, optimize resource allocation and better serve the diverse needs of our residents. This can take on multiple forms, ranging from administrative only to more integration in terms of how councils are structured.

But again, we are looking for the government's intentions here. We're not just here to bring you more information; we have lots of other things that we can do with our time. We want to know what your intentions are, and we want to begin those discussions to do things differently. We want to do things differently, and we want to do more of them. That is our commitment.

Our proposed changes are not rooted in a desire for isolation, but rather in a quest for enhanced efficiency and accountability.

Now, Mr. Chairman, I see that your light has come on, so I don't want to tax you by being tardy.

We're confident, however, that this transformation will not only address the current challenges, but also serve as a model for better and more efficient and equitable service delivery.

So we are here, we stand united with this group of colleagues this morning—I'm very pleased to be here with the chair and Mayor Ugolini. But we want to create a

stronger and more resilient governance and delivery model for west Niagara and all Lincoln, and I reiterate: Lincoln council and staff are committed to doing better and doing more.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal): Thank you, Mayor Easton, for your presentation.

This concludes everyone's presentations. We'll now move to the first round of questioning. This will start with the official opposition. MPP Burch.

Mr. Jeff Burch: I want to thank all three of the presenters for very thoughtful presentations. I know you have staff here as well and you put some time and thought into these presentations, and our whole committee appreciates that.

I'm going to start with Chair Bradley. I'm glad that you pointed out right at the beginning the purpose of this committee. It's been pretty clearly articulated by the minister, which is, first of all, to examine whether two-tiered governance in the six regions supports or hinders the construction of new homes—I'm glad we're focusing on building homes—and to examine whether certain services could be combined or moved from one level of government to another.

Here in Niagara it has kind of been a blood sport for, I don't know, as long as I can remember, this discussing governance models. Leading up to today, we've heard things floated out there. Mayor Ugolini referred to the four-city model that some folks—it's usually the larger municipalities—are talking about.

But I want to focus on the region's role and this suggestion that there's duplication, because we know that with Bill 23 most of the planning processes were removed from the region. We know municipalities are working together to address issues of red tape and other planning issues. Can you comment on the work that has gone on and this suggestion that there's some kind of large duplication still going on?

Mr. Jim Bradley: The suggestion that the municipalities—and I can speak for those in Niagara—are holding up development simply does not hold water. I said we had over 39,000 units in the process right now that if the developers wanted to move forward on—they have their reasons for not doing so—we would be way ahead. We would have 10 or 11 years of housing units in the process at that time. We, even before the province, suggested through Bill 23 that local municipalities take over more of the planning—we were already doing that—so the region doesn't meddle in the local planning process that takes place.

I have followed very carefully what Minister Calandra has had to say, and my interpretation of why this committee was set up was to see: Is there a way we can have housing built more quickly? Are there any impediments to it? I think that's right that the committee is focusing on that. We can get off into many different directions with this. We can get up with our hobby horses and say we'd like this to happen or that to happen, but I am focusing on that. I can assure you the region is doing that, and we have established a specific office for housing itself as well.

In terms of the co-operation, it's unprecedented co-operation between the local municipalities and the region. The CAOs have been meeting on an ongoing basis and they have been making progress in finding places where we can share those particular opportunities to work together. It saves money and it means that the process is much more expeditious.

But you're correct in your assessment that the municipality is not holding it up. We're full speed ahead, and the mayor of Thorold just pointed out, as the fourth-fastest-growing community in Canada, that, in fact, that's happening.

Mr. Jeff Burch: Thank you. I wanted to also ask, with the number of approvals that are in the system—obviously, there's an issue with getting shovels in the ground, and that may be due partly to the lack of having something like a sunset clause where builders have to build once they get an approval in a certain amount of time. It also obviously has to do with the economics. They're trying to make money and right now is not the best time to get shovels in the ground, but there are approvals that are building up that are not being acted on. Can you give us an idea of how big a problem that is right now across the region?

Mr. Jim Bradley: That is a challenge for us, quite obviously. This is not a complaint against the development community. As you point out, they may have a hard time getting skilled trades, they may have a hard time getting materials. Certainly, financing has changed, with the interest rates going up. So I can assure you that they are not doing it to be obstinate.

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However, Minister Calandra, when he was talking about MZOs, started to say that if the government was going to grant an MZO, they would give a certain period of time and then they'd pull the MZO back if, in fact, the developer were not proceeding. There's a fear that someone can get a rezoning to take place and then simply flip the land to somebody else and make money flipping the land. That's not the goal of the government, in my view. The government, really, is laser-focused on getting housing built. If anybody were to ask, "What is this government all about?"—it's about getting housing built, and we are doing that now.

Mr. Jeff Burch: I have time for one more question. I'm going to stay with you, but I'm going to get to Mayor Ugolini and Mayor Easton in the next round.

I found it a bit alarming to hear some of the chatter in the community about a proposal to both disband the region and force amalgamations at the lower tier, at a time when we're in a housing crisis and an affordability crisis, without knowing the costs etc.

We also know, to the government's credit, that they pulled back on a plan to disband Peel region because there would be an enormous tax increase. I heard they were losing about 250 employees a week just on the rumour that they were going to dissolve the region. Can you comment on that experience in Peel?

Mr. Jim Bradley: I think that Dr. David Siegel, who is a renowned and respected person in terms of his knowledge of and writings on municipal affairs, has clearly pointed out that they keep looking for the savings that there are, for instance, in these amalgamations taking place, and a lot of the proponents of amalgamation have now given up on that argument. Certainly, Dr. Andrew Sancton, University of Western Ontario, wrote a book called *Merger Mania* a number of years ago, where he pointed out the weaknesses of that particular argument.

We think that the action that we're taking now is moving forward with it. I happen to believe, personally, that it would be a distraction to go into the rabbit hole of all these governance proposals when, in fact, we are meeting the needs of this committee and of the Ontario government and Minister Calandra, who has clearly outlined the fact that he wants housing built. I do not think we should get into any distractions that prevent us from moving forward in that regard.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal): That concludes the time for the official opposition.

I would now like to move on to our independent member, MPP McMahon.

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: Happy new year, everyone. Thanks to everyone for coming down and giving up their free time to join this scintillating committee. I'm from Toronto, so I'm learning about your beautiful areas, although I did—I am a small-town girl. I grew up in Collingwood—similar to Thorold, which we were talking about.

I have a very short time for questions. We're going to just keep Jim Bradley on the hot seat first and get to the other two amazing people in the next round.

Jim, thank you for that presentation and all your sage advice. Pretty impressive, your housing units—what was the number, again?

Mr. Jim Bradley: It was over 39,200-and-something. I think it's 39,283 housing units in the process of proceeding. We're not holding anything up. It used to be this mythology—and my friend MPP Coe would know, having been at the municipal level at one time as well. There was perhaps, at one time, a legitimate argument that local municipalities are holding up development. That certainly is not the case in Niagara at this time, and those 39,000 units I'm talking about are evidence of that. We have been laser-focused, as has the province. We're partners with the province in wanting to get housing built, and the actions we've taken internally and between municipalities have militated in favour of that.

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: That's all types of housing? That's co-ops, semi-detached, stacked towns, towns, garden suites, and not just single-family detached homes?

Mr. Jim Bradley: That is correct. We recognize there must be a wide variety of housing units that are available to people so they can afford them and so that we can utilize our land in the best possible way. The government has indicated as well that it wants to see municipalities intensifying, as they should. You can't have it both ways. You

can't have sprawl and intensify at the same time. If you want to be able to intensify as much as possible, put a variety of options available to people. That's what our goal is in Niagara. That's what we're seeing happening.

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: And a focus on energy efficiency and sustainable builds, given we're in a climate emergency.

Mr. Jim Bradley: Certainly, our council is very much in favour of looking at ways to be more energy efficient. By consolidating, by having these different options available that may not have been prevalent in years gone by, we're seeing much better use of land in that regard and transportation and so on as a result of that. But again, the provincial government has said it wants to see a variety of housing units available so that people can afford them and the land is being used appropriately.

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: So you're saying you're the biggest YIMBY municipality in Ontario—one of them.

Mr. Jim Bradley: I can tell you one thing: At the regional level, I can't think of one instance where NIMBY-ism has prevented development from taking place.

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: Fabulous. Last question, probably—although, I was interested in your staff team with the shared services, but we'll skip that for now. You had some great recommendations. The one that interested me was your second one, maybe looking at an approvals facilitator or, I think you said, a provincial chief planner to speed things up.

Mr. Jim Bradley: I think that would be very good because it's not only municipalities that can hold up development; it can be ministries as well. Having been a minister in years gone by, I remember complaints to the Ministry of the Environment that we were taking too long in dealing with a particular item. So if we had a facilitator out there who could look at not only local municipalities but the various ministries to see if we can proceed more quickly yet meet all the qualifications required and all the needs required, we think that would be good for the government to at least give consideration to.

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: You're suggesting that today, and you have support with your other colleagues on that idea.

Mr. Jim Bradley: Actually, I'm only speaking for myself at this time, because I cannot speak for the 12 municipalities out there or others. You'll hear from them as well.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal): Thank you, Chair. That concludes our time for the independent members today.

I'd like to now move on to our government members. MPP Rae.

Mr. Matthew Rae: Thank you, Chair. Happy new year, everyone. It's lovely to be in Niagara today. Thank you to our three esteemed presenters.

Briefly, as my colleague from Niagara MPP Burch outlined as well, with the minister's mandate to this committee on the study of regional governance, it really is

about getting our 1.5 million homes built by 2031. Minister Calandra asked us to do a review of seven regions now. He is referring Peel to this committee as well, and we're travelling there on Friday.

Obviously, this review is using a public, open and accountable process to ensure that impacts of these various policies across upper tiers are understood and reflected in the final advice to Minister Calandra—which will obviously be public—from this committee to the minister when we conclude our deliberations.

My question—I know many of my colleagues have many questions, so I'll try to be brief, to my colleagues who presented, but my question is to the mayor of Thorold. I was just wondering if you could identify two of the biggest challenges facing two-tier municipal government structures, especially in such a fast-growing community as your own.

Mr. Terry Ugolini: I think that, when we look at what has transpired, one of them has been removed by your government, and that is removing the land use planning approval function from regional government to the local level. I think that really is going to be a huge help moving forward.

On the other end of the spectrum, I think one of the biggest things we always are concerned about is long-term-growth planning and making sure the infrastructure is in place so that we will be able to continue to build homes. I think we're always looking and we're working with the government—one of the initiatives we've worked closely on is the Niagara south waste water treatment plant—to make sure that infrastructure is going to be in place so that we can continue down the road and make sure that the housing starts will continue to be fulfilled, because we'll have the infrastructure in place.

Mr. Matthew Rae: Thank you very much.

I defer my time to my colleague, Chair.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal): Mr. Oosterhoff.

Mr. Sam Oosterhoff: Thank you very much, Chair, and my thanks to all presenters this morning. I've really appreciated working with Mayor Ugolini, Chair Bradley and, of course, Mayor Easton, and I look forward to continuing that work.

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I have a lot of questions, so I'm going to hop into them. I would appreciate if you're able to be brief in your responses—mercifully brief, as the Chair would say. I will be asking similar questions to many of the presenters today, so I'm looking forward to seeing some consistency or where people differ in their responses.

I want to begin by asking, what is the population of the Niagara region, Chair Bradley?

Mr. Jim Bradley: It's hard to pin it down because we're growing every day, but we're well over 400,000 people in the Niagara region at this time, when you take it from one end of the region to the other.

Mr. Sam Oosterhoff: How many municipal politicians are in Niagara?

Mr. Jim Bradley: I couldn't tell you the number, but I can tell you that each one of them is doing a job on behalf of the local municipality or the regional municipality.

Mr. Sam Oosterhoff: I believe there are 126.

What is the population of Toronto, roughly?

Mr. Jim Bradley: I would say Toronto is about two and a half million people.

Mr. Sam Oosterhoff: It's just past three million, I believe—year before last.

How many municipal politicians are in Toronto?

Mr. Jim Bradley: They have 25 on their council.

Mr. Sam Oosterhoff: What is the population of Ontario, roughly?

Mr. Jim Bradley: It's about 14 million at the present time.

Mr. Sam Oosterhoff: I think we're just shy of 16 million now.

Mr. Jim Bradley: Yes, it's growing remarkably—

Mr. Sam Oosterhoff: Rapidly, yes.

How many provincial politicians are there in Ontario?

Mr. Jim Bradley: There are about 122 members of the Ontario Legislature and members of federal Parliament.

Mr. Sam Oosterhoff: There are 126 municipal politicians in Niagara. And there are 124 provincial politicians, with the population just shy of 16 million.

One of the biggest concerns I'm hearing from those building homes, planning expansion and seeking to improve services is the duplication and, frankly, the different layers and delays that they're experiencing. So I'm wondering, just looking at the amount of people who are in the decision-making capacity, how many CAOs are in Niagara?

Mr. Jim Bradley: Each municipality has a CAO. In Niagara, we have one at the regional level. Each of the 12 municipalities has a chief administrative officer.

Mr. Sam Oosterhoff: So that would be 13?

Mr. Jim Bradley: Yes. All of them are working together very well these days.

Mr. Sam Oosterhoff: How many are in Toronto?

Mr. Jim Bradley: I presume they have one and a large staff in Toronto—a much larger staff in Toronto than we would have in Niagara, understandably.

Mr. Sam Oosterhoff: How many library CAOs are in Niagara?

Mr. Jim Bradley: I do not deal with the libraries because they're at the local level, but each would likely have its own CAO.

Mr. Sam Oosterhoff: Mayor Easton, if I remember correctly, the town of Lincoln and the town of Pelham have recently combined your libraries, so you have one CAO. So I think there are 11. Is that correct?

Ms. Sandra Easton: I think that's a reasonable number.

Mr. Sam Oosterhoff: How many chief building officers are in the Niagara region or across Niagara? Do you know?

Mr. Jim Bradley: I'm glad you mention that because that's where we want to consolidate into one office, the reason being that we would all have the same rules at that time and they would have to go to one place. We have

done that as a result of when we looked at ways that we could expedite the building of housing units. That's exactly what we're doing, consolidating that.

Mr. Sam Oosterhoff: So there are probably about 13 currently, and you're looking at some of that consolidating—

Mr. Jim Bradley: Each municipality would have its own.

Mr. Sam Oosterhoff: How many chief building officers would be in Hamilton, next door?

Mr. Jim Bradley: They would have many in the department. In Hamilton, they have a very large staff as well, so while they might have one person with that title, there are a lot of people under that person as well.

Mr. Sam Oosterhoff: How many fire chiefs are in Niagara?

Mr. Jim Bradley: I would presume there would be 12 fire chiefs in Niagara.

Mr. Sam Oosterhoff: How many chiefs of police?

Mr. Jim Bradley: There's one chief of police in Niagara and several deputies.

Mr. Sam Oosterhoff: You were elected in 1970 as a school board trustee, correct?

Mr. Jim Bradley: I was elected as a member of local council.

Mr. Sam Oosterhoff: Okay. So that was in St. Catharines?

Mr. Jim Bradley: That is correct.

Mr. Sam Oosterhoff: The same year that we saw the municipalities created—26 lower-tier municipalities became 12; two upper-tier counties became the regional municipality.

What was your position at that time? Were you in support of that amalgamation or not, in 1970?

Mr. Jim Bradley: Not at that time. The council of St. Catharines thought that we were not getting the best possible deal out of regional government. So the council—and I was part of that council—was not in favour of a regional government at that time. In fact, there were many who wanted to secede from the region on that occasion.

Mr. Sam Oosterhoff: So in 1970, when the current structure was created, you weren't in favour of it—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal): Thank you, Chair and MPP Oosterhoff. That concludes our time for the government members.

I'd like to take the questioning back to the official opposition. MPP Jeff Burch.

Mr. Jeff Burch: I'll take a couple of questions and then I'll pass things over to my colleague MPP Gates.

Terry, thanks for your presentation. I'm a proud resident of Thorold myself, and it's great to see: the eighth-fastest-growing municipality, the fourth-fastest in Ontario. I was interested in your comment. You mentioned being, I think we can agree, the most successful municipality in Niagara in terms of the number of homes being built compared to the size of the municipality. You felt that forced amalgamations at the local level would actually hinder your ability to perform at that level. I wanted to ask you about that.

Also, we keep hearing this talk about there being 126 politicians. I know that you have done some math in Thorold with respect to your council, who are part-time councillors—which I've always found an excellent deal for taxpayers. How much of your budget is used up for paying your entire council of part-time councillors? And do you think that there's anything wrong with your constituents having elected officials that they can call when they have questions about how their money is being spent?

Mr. Terry Ugolini: We spend very little on council expenses. I think if you look at it overall, our whole budget, it's probably 0.3%; if you look at just the operating side, it's just over 0.5%.

But our councillors get all the calls. They not only get calls from the municipal level, they get calls from the regional level, because a lot of times the residents don't know who to call, and then we point them in the right direction. And they sit on a lot of committees and do a lot of committee work for the city, so the value for dollar—it's outstanding value for dollar. If you look at what they do and what they get paid for and what that brings to the city of Thorold, I think it's money well spent.

Mr. Jeff Burch: My other question, on the strong performance on delivering housing in the city of Thorold, and your comment with respect to this talk about amalgamations and whatnot being a distraction to those efforts—can you speak to that?

Mr. Terry Ugolini: I think that any change now would be detrimental to building homes. We're laser-focused on that, and we put a lot of resources and energy into making sure that we get the approvals done, we get the developments approved and we get the building permits out.

When you talk to developers and builders—and I've had them in my office, and not one of them has come in and complained about development charges, okay? They come in and say, "Can we move on getting this development approved? Can we get building permits?" That's what they want, and we deliver on that. And when we were short-staffed, we even went out to use an external consulting company to make sure that we produced the results that we expect to produce and the level of service we expect to produce for the city.

So I'm confident, under the existing structure and with the changes that the government made on the planning side, that we're a well-oiled machine. You can just look—when I talk about 658 houses, I'm talking that they're actually under construction or finished being constructed. They're not permits issued, okay? So if you look at that based on per capita, I think we're higher than number 4 and number 8 now, with the way we're moving. That was as of the last census.

I think that under the current system, we're showing that we're delivering results and we're punching above our weight.

Mr. Jeff Burch: Congratulations on that, and I will hand things over to my colleague MPP Gates.

Mr. Wayne Gates: First of all, to Chair Bradley: I'm going to question, laser-focused on building housing. We

wasted a year trying to develop on the greenbelt that could have been used to build housing in the Niagara region.

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What we have here in Ontario, in particular in Niagara, is a housing crisis. We have an affordability crisis. People can't afford groceries. Our seniors are still dying in long-term-care facilities. We have a number of issues.

I really was surprised quite frankly by the opening comments of my Conservative colleagues when they focused on the number of politicians and how much money they're being paid. I think the mayor of Thorold was very clear. It's this much, as far as we look at the budget. It's right there; there is how much we're going to save on politicians. We should be focused on housing. That's where the crisis is. So "laser-focused" is a word that I think we should be careful on, what we're saying, because I don't believe we have been laser-focused on building houses.

But, again, this is to Chair Bradley: I've heard from several municipalities in the last several months with concerns on hitting their housing targets—and here is a reason why we're not hitting our housing targets, and what are we going to do about it? I think that's what we should be discussing today. We have inflation that has caused a big problem, in particular for young people to try to get a mortgage, to try to get that first home, that starter home. We have interest rates that have gone up to 5.5%, 6%. Inflation was running somewhere between 6.5% and 7% as we brought in Bill 124 that is hindering our health care system, right across the province of Ontario. We have a labour shortage, particularly around skilled trades. We have a number of reasons why developers aren't developing, and some of the reasons why they're not include that the cost of materials have gone through the roof, as we know. So these are some of the reasons why developers—developers want to build. Developers want to build homes. They want to build affordable housing. They want to work with municipalities.

The developers that I talked to have no problem paying for development fees, because they understand they have an obligation to take care of our roads, our sewers, our waste water, our hospitals, our policing. They understand that, but could you discuss some of the challenges you've seen for developers to begin building outside of the structures of municipal government? And that's to Chair Bradley.

Mr. Jim Bradley: You have identified the challenges they face. Skilled trades is a problem, and all governments are scrambling to get more skilled trades out there. A lot of them have retired at a certain age. So we need more skilled trades.

Second, some of the materials are not available for them. The third that you identified is the interest rates and the costs, they're not proceeding for that reason. But you also made reference to the circumstances with the number of politicians. It's very glib, very popular to say, "Well, there are too many politicians in Niagara." When you actually examine it—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal): Thank you, Chair. That concludes our time for the members.

I'd like to now move to the independent member, MPP McMahon. To make things a little bit easier, I'll start giving out 30-second warnings so you know we're coming to a conclusion. Thank you.

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: And I would happily follow up on that, as I was going to.

I just want to state on the record, as a former Toronto city councillor who worked tirelessly as politicians do: Toronto should have more councillors—this is to my colleague across the way. Residents were robbed of democracy when Toronto city council was cut in half in the middle of an election, for no apparent reason. It is wrong. It is unfair to residents and the politicians, and it did not save any money—so just getting facts straight across the table.

All right, now onto questions. So we'll have Terry, and Sandra will get a turn—thank you. So, Terry, I found out Thorold has 30,000 now residents, similar to Collingwood. So you were talking about changing the governance structure in a housing crisis not being a good idea. I'm wondering if you can elaborate more on that.

Mr. Terry Ugolini: Yes. I think, if you look at the way things are geared and the way we're moving and being, a term that MPP Gates didn't like, laser-focused on trying to achieve the goals the government has set out—if you work under a certain structure with changes and you move forward based on that structure, to change that structure mid-course is going to create an adjustment which is going to make change in what you're trying to achieve. So, obviously, it would be an impediment in where you're heading. What we try to do is we optimize what we're doing within the existing structure to make sure we achieve our goals.

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: I really liked your details about building housing next to green space, which we know is very important. Especially in the pandemic, we found out how valuable our natural spaces are. So thanks for doing that, and thanks for everything you do in the beautiful city of Thorold. I need to visit there.

On to Mayor Easton: Thank you again for coming. What's the population of Lincoln?

Ms. Sandra Easton: It's about 28,000, and moving quickly to 30,000.

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: You mentioned at the beginning that you had planned to do a joint presentation with other municipalities in your area and you weren't able to. Could you explain that to me a bit?

Ms. Sandra Easton: The three municipalities—Grimsby, West Lincoln and Lincoln—had a tri-council meeting a few months ago. The purpose of the meeting was to see if there was an appetite for us to work more closely together on no specifically defined shared services, but to get a sense of where the councillors themselves might be coming from. As part of the discussion, we had small group sessions, and as part of those sessions, the issue of amalgamation came up—no decisions. Not everybody was talking about it, but it was on the table, which I was quite surprised about.

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: You also mentioned that you're glad we're talking—we're all here talking amicably, for now—and you were wondering about looking for the government's intentions with this review, as other people are.

the Acting Chair (Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal): You have 30 seconds remaining.

Ms. Sandra Easton: Yes, I am looking for intentions, and I believe that with those intentions, not only will we be able to define the move forward, but we will also know what the expectations are: what could be monitored, what could be audited and what could be penalized in the future.

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: I think everybody is looking for those answers.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal): I'd like to now move on to the government members. MPP Oosterhoff.

Mr. Sam Oosterhoff: My thanks again to the presenters this morning. I'm going to go back to Chair Bradley. I also have a question or two for Mayor Easton.

Chair Bradley, I want to congratulate you and the entire region, all new lower-tier municipalities as well, on the creation of Niagara regional transit. That's a very big thing that has been under way for a while.

When was the idea of regional transit first floated?

Mr. Jim Bradley: It would be at least 10 years ago. What has happened in the Niagara region—we evolved to those areas. We don't rush into it; we evolve over the years, just as we took over waste management and then we decided to take over transit.

Anything that makes sense at the regional level, we have moved that to the regional level. Where it makes sense at the local level, where it only affects one municipality, we've left it there or pushed it back there.

Mr. Sam Oosterhoff: Last night, I had the chance to read an interesting article from Niagara This Week: "Regional Road 61 to Be Known by Another Name." It says the town of Niagara-on-the-Lake passed a resolution for the name change of Townline Stamford Road to Niagara Townline Road almost a decade ago, in 2014. I believe just earlier this week, the region finally approved that. So it took, I believe, 10 years to rename a regional road to the correct name.

I'm just thinking about my time as a young child. I have seven siblings; there were a lot of us. We would be eating a lot of food, and my mom would be sometimes making that food—a lot of stamppot, a lot of potatoes. She had a saying sometimes—I think you've heard it before. When we were all crowding around, she'd say, "There are too many cooks in the kitchen. Things aren't getting done. I need you to get out." We need a couple of people to make decisions and move forward. I think sometimes that can apply to municipal government as well.

Mr. Jim Bradley: Not in Niagara, however.

Mr. Sam Oosterhoff: Of course, from your perspective, not in Niagara.

I do hear a lot from local businesses, local individuals, those who are seeking to provide services in Niagara about going through the various levels. You have the local tier,

you have the upper tier, and then you have the conservation authorities and a variety of other organizations—which do important work, but can create duplications. I think we do see some of that.

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I want to go back to the conversation we were having before we were so rudely interrupted—Mr. Chair, just kidding—with regard to the governance changes in 1970, because let's be clear: If we do seek governance changes, those could be in place for 50 years, right? We're at 54 years since the last changes. If there are changes that could go into effect, that could be for the next 50 years.

And so, I just want to ask you: You seem quite content with the current structure. That's the tone I was understanding. Do you think that the current structure is going to serve the people of Niagara well for another 50 years?

Mr. Jim Bradley: I can't project 50 years ahead, but I can say, if you're asking me, "Is it working at this particular time," I would say it is. I go to the fact that things have evolved over the years. There have been changes made. But there has been an evolving rather than a bull-in-a-china-shop approach, where you go in and bust everything up—things go sideways were you to decide to do it that way.

I should mention as well, because you were very kind in asking certain questions, that in these places that have fewer politicians, first of all, they're full-time and getting paid more than you are as a member of the Legislature, which makes everyone unhappy. In Toronto, for instance, they have their staff, and when you look at the total cost of the fewer politicians, you find out they're costing you more than the so-called 128 politicians or whatever it is.

Mr. Sam Oosterhoff: I do want to be clear that I haven't brought up the issue of cost one time. I've only been talking about the decision-making capacity and the too-many-cooks-in-the-kitchen piece, because I think that that is also a key part of this.

If you look at the number of people that it took in order to get something like Niagara Region Transit in place, and a number of other places—I'm going to actually now move to Mayor Easton on this question. I'm going to ask her: You have an excellent system now with the union library with the town of Pelham. You now only have one CEO. You've redirected those savings—I believe about \$170,000—directly into front-line service. Why have no other lower-tier municipalities pursued similar shared services?

I'm going to be hearing a lot about shared services today. Everyone is talking about it. You actually have been able to do it. Why aren't other municipalities following your lead?

Ms. Sandra Easton: I have no idea, MPP, but I do know one thing: that if people don't have the courage to move together, testing out different concepts, you will never find out whether or not you could have one chief librarian for all of Niagara; it can't happen. And so, I don't know why these things aren't done. It's undoubtedly a matter of priorities.

But I think your questions, all of the questions about how many people we have or we don't have—you have to

understand that with my health background, I do have some extensive experience with organizational behaviour. So let me tell you that the roles and responsibilities piece with planning is hugely beneficial. It was the best thing that happened, and it happened with a huge amount of work by staff in the background, which is what should be happening. It's not that there wasn't a hiccup; there wasn't a hiccup on the outside—and the public don't care. They don't need to see absolutely every detail about what's going on. They just need to know that that service is going to be there.

Mr. Sam Oosterhoff: I have one last question, though, because I want to make sure I get it in. I had a builder recently reach out. They do custom homes in Lincoln and West Lincoln, and they were talking about the discrepancy between, I believe, some of the requirements for septic installations in Lincoln and in West Lincoln. They were saying, "If I'm building it on the south side of Fly Road, then I have to meet this requirement for the grade, and if I'm building on the north side in West Lincoln, I have to have a different grade requirement." Does it make sense that we have inconsistencies from one side of the road—

Ms. Sandra Easton: Well, it could very well make a difference if you've got an issue with buried PVCs.

Mr. Sam Oosterhoff: But on one side of the same road as the other, for septic?

Ms. Sandra Easton: Well, I'm just suggesting to you that there could be something. People don't always just make things up as they go along. I think that this is a job that councillors do very well, and we should all take the example. We should listen, and then we should go and find out. In Lincoln, that means you going in the backyard or you getting into the crawlspace or whatever needs to be done.

One of our biggest problems is, we don't operate with the truth all the time. We're not dealing with facts, and so I think that when people have these questions and make these comments as if there were idiots at the end of the line all the time, we would find out that the circumstances are quite different. I don't mean to be rude to you, MPP Oosterhoff—

Mr. Sam Oosterhoff: Not at all.

Ms. Sandra Easton: —but we do have a lot of sharp tongues around the communities.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal): Thirty seconds.

Mr. Sam Oosterhoff: Last question: If you absolutely had to pick, Mayor Easton, would you pick a single-tier Niagara governance model with one council, a four-municipality single-tier model with service boards for shared services or the current 13-municipality model?

Ms. Sandra Easton: Okay, this is me giving my opinion—

Mr. Sam Oosterhoff: Personally.

Ms. Sandra Easton: I don't like all those ancillary choices, but I see in west Niagara, we could easily—and you well know this—be one municipality, and the service delivery model, I think, would be very tight and it would be extremely beneficial from a customer perspective.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal): Thank you, Mayor Easton. That concludes our time today.

I'd like to thank the presenters for taking their time out today to engage in this amazing discussion. Thank you, everybody.

CITY OF PORT COLBORNE
CITY OF WELLAND
MR. ROB FOSTER

The Acting Chair (Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal): I'd like to now welcome our next group of presenters. I'd like to welcome the city of Port Colborne, Robert Foster and the city of Welland. We'll give it a couple of seconds for everybody to get settled, and then we'll start with our second presentation.

Okay, I'd like to now begin our second set of presentations. We can start with mayor of Port Colborne, Mayor William "Bill" Steele. The floor is yours. Please state your name for the record before you begin.

Mr. William Steele: William Steele, mayor of the city of Port Colborne.

Good morning, everyone, and on behalf of Port Colborne city council, city staff and our citizens, we appreciate the standing committee coming to Niagara. We thank you for the opportunity to provide comments on governance reform.

Having spent 23 years in local and regional government—former chair and current member of the Niagara police services; provincially, I've served on the Ontario Trillium Foundation board, the Niagara College Foundation board; and I currently serve as the Ontario caucus chair of the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence Cities Initiative, a binational organization. Personally, as a lifelong resident and business owner in Niagara and Port Colborne, I feel I have a broad perspective on the dynamics of the relationships, successes and, frankly, failures of the current government structure in Niagara.

For those of you who aren't familiar with our city, Port Colborne is a vibrant community located along the shores of Lake Erie. The Welland Canal runs through the heart of our city. Port Colborne is the second-fastest-growing municipality in Niagara according to the 2021 census. We're governed by a council of nine and are embarking on a full independent review of that model, including a review of electoral boundaries with an eye to reform.

There's a lot I could tell you about our municipality, but to focus on the subject matter of today's committee, we're providing good governance, finding opportunities to share municipal service delivery with our neighbours and achieving value for our taxpayers and the challenges in a homegrown, citizen-focused way.

As an example, over the past year, we've been working closely with our neighbours at the township of Wainfleet, including a formal agreement to share municipal services where and when it has a shared benefit for us all, whether that is helping to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of our service delivery or providing some kind of cost benefit or savings to our taxpayers.

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Council and staff have also been working with other municipalities and the region to identify shared service opportunities that could have benefits if delivered to residents in a shared model. We're also working closely with the Niagara region on a project to service our east-side employment lands. Our staff also works with other Niagara municipalities to share best practices and create working groups on municipal elections, tourism, purchasing, emergency management, training, communications, economic development and more. Port Colborne has also entered into an agreement with Niagara Falls for a shared enterprise resource system for human resources and software while maintaining the core processes that work for us. These are just a few of the initiatives and shared service arrangements that Port Colborne is already working on.

I want to be clear: I am concerned with any potential changes to the current municipal structure or any proposal to amalgamate Niagara municipalities. As Brock University political scientist David Siegel stated, there has never been a municipal amalgamation that has saved money. There are many past and recent cases where it actually would cost more and disrupt successful homegrown solutions already in place.

If significant municipal amalgamations were to be imposed in Niagara, who would take on the debt of the regional capital projects? For example, would Niagara Falls assume the \$400-million debt on the new sewage treatment plant? Would St. Catharines pick up the \$100-million debt on the Burgoyne Bridge? Would some of this debt be allocated to other municipalities?

I'm also concerned that consolidating programs and services may result in cost pressures and budget impacts that ultimately affect the taxpayer. For example, Port Colborne's annual cost for transit prior to transit amalgamation was \$300,000 per year. Under the new transit system, the cost has increased three times to almost \$1 million. But don't get me wrong; I was in favour of this. I worked on this. To answer a question earlier, in 2003 we started the amalgamation talk with transit. Our service is better today than it was, so we do think it's a fair deal, but you can see the cost pressure that it is on our taxpayer.

We saw first-hand during the transition that all employee contracts were renegotiated to the top grid of the highest existing contract. The proposed dissolution of Peel region, which has now been reversed, has shown that building programs and services, reassigning priority projects and trying to manage a mass exodus of experienced municipal staff can have unintended and harsh consequences for residents and businesses.

Michael Fenn, one of the facilitators appointed by the province in 2019 to review regional government, has been quoted as saying that local communities should decide what is best for them in terms of governance, decision-making and service delivery. I couldn't agree more. Our city is run not as a business, but in a business-principled way. We are efficient, we are innovative, we are progressive, and we are responsive to the needs of our community. We are also civic-minded, and we provide high-quality

public programs and services in a financially sustainable way.

The action is at the local level, and Niagara municipalities such as the city of Port Colborne are at the forefront of generating economic activity, attracting investment, welcoming new residents and helping to create more housing affordably. In a recent example, we partnered with Port Cares, our local social services hub, by donating surplus land to build an on-time, on-budget, 40-unit, geared-to-income housing project.

Port Colborne council and staff will continue to work with our neighbours on shared service arrangements and innovative approaches to improve service delivery while achieving value for the taxpayer. We aren't asking to keep the status quo. We know the goals, and we embrace the challenge. We're asking for an opportunity to set a new way of governing where we continue to achieve our goals and those of the province, like growing our community and building affordable homes. We know we can do it and, like Michael Fenn, we believe we should decide what works best for us.

Again, thank you for the opportunity to provide comments, and I look forward to the question and answer period.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal): Thank you for your presentation, Mayor Steele.

I'd now like to move forward to the city of Welland: Mayor Frank Campion. Please state your name for the record.

Mr. Frank Campion: Frank Campion, mayor of Welland. Thanks for this opportunity. Before I get into it, I would like to thank the Chair for not wearing a tie today. I don't feel completely out of place.

I'm speaking on behalf of myself as the mayor of Welland and not particularly for the council of the city of Welland, as well as the CAO Rob Axiak.

I've been in municipal politics for a little over 30 years. I hate to admit that. This is the fourth review that I've been through. What this started out as—when we were talking about having facilitators come down and looking at who should provide what services, who's best at doing those sorts of things, I was excited, because the previous three that I went through were all about amalgamation. And then somehow, this is kind of turning into an amalgamation discussion, which I don't think we're really—I'd like to get back to where we were starting with this and find out who should be doing what, who's best at doing what, and then allocating the services accordingly.

I'm not going to talk about amalgamation. I'll answer questions about it, but when I first started with these discussions, there were three main topics that came up in the past, and they're still relevant today. One of them is that we talk about shared services. It's a great concept, and shared services are good. They can save money. However, I don't think that's the real reason behind shared services. I think shared services are more about co-operation between municipalities so that we're making right decisions, consistent decisions. But that's one of the issues that had come up, and the response to it historically, over the

past three things that I've gone through, was, "Let's just talk about shared services." Mainly, that was put together by municipalities trying to avoid amalgamation into one city. That was the premise behind all of that and continues to be, I think, today.

Then, we have businesses that say, "There are too many municipalities. We're dealing with too many people. We have different approaches at different municipal levels." They have often been promoting a single city. The single-city concept we're completely opposed to, because what you're doing is creating a bigger bureaucracy that slows things down.

I can tell you, from our perspective in the city of Welland, we're talking about housing, we're talking about development, we're talking about industrial development and that sort of thing. We're much more nimble than a larger municipality. I have lots of people coming in and talking to me and saying, "I cannot believe how quickly you can get us in the ground, how quickly you can get us our permits, how quickly we can get through the planning processes." That's because smaller municipalities are more nimble and are able to address those issues very, very quickly and work with the developers through that. They come and they tell me—I won't name the larger municipality, but they say, "This is refreshing to come down here and actually have somebody talking to us."

One of the questions that came up when we had a meeting with municipal affairs and housing during AMO: "Frank, how do you do this? What do you do?" And I told them, "It's a secret. I'm not going to share that with you." But then, the first thing that our planners said was, "Number one, we answer the phone." That's the key element. And if we're talking about larger municipalities, you're going to get stuck in this cycle of going, "Nobody's going to get back to you," and that's what we're hearing.

So I think it's important that we recognize the fact that municipalities should not amalgamate until such time as it makes a lot of sense. I'm not sure it makes a lot of sense right now.

When we talk about two-tier systems, two-tier systems work, but, again, ours is not working as well as it should. Part of that is because we need to determine who is best at doing what. So in my perspective—and I think the bill is already there, and I think Mayor Ugolini mentioned this: The legislation is in place to take planning away from the region and put it back in the hands of the LAMs. And that's where it should be because we know what it should look like—and, of course, we're much faster at it, so it's just an extra level or roadblock, to put it mildly, that we're very much opposed to. We really need to have that delegated authority back to the municipalities to be able to do that so that we can do our job effectively.

At the municipality of Welland, we have our target with the provincial government; we are at 211%. So most municipalities aren't meeting their targets; we're at 200% of our targets. We're expecting to get a nice cheque cut for us based on that, but that just shows that we can get it done and it's a matter of having the right people in the right

places at the right time that know what they're doing—our development teams and our planning department.

I know I'm probably going to run out of time. I've got a lot of stuff to say here. One of the things that I've proposed to Fenn many, many years ago—it was 2015 or something; I can't remember—whenever that was, I talked to him about this, that we need to have planning at the local level and the issue that keeps coming up is, "Well, there's just too many different rules." My proposition at that time was to look at having the lower-area municipalities—right now, there are 12 of them—set up a planning committee with planners from each one of those municipalities, hire one consultant and create one document, which would be the official plan; that we cover all of the municipalities with all of their input, but there is only one official plan, which drives zoning, drives development and makes it much, much simpler. I think that is something we should be looking at.

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I think I'm running out of time, so I'll just end with the concept of too many politicians—again, there are no savings in that. There may be some efficiencies in reduction of politicians. I'm neither for it or against it, but I think the more important part of that is—and I hope something can come out of this. Bill 5 is gone. Bill 5 was going to deal with harassment, with politicians acting badly, particularly with relationship to city staff. This is a major distraction for a lot of municipalities. They keep getting bogged down in dealing with these issues, as opposed to doing the business that we're supposed to be doing, which is moving our cities forward. We're stuck in this rut. So I'm hoping that at some point—this is an important part of governance, when you're looking at it. We need to have tools in place, because there is not a lot of money in being a politician—particularly councillors. If the biggest thing you can do to them is say, "Guess what, you're not going to get paid for three months," they're not giving up very much money in that three months, and it's not much of a deterrent—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal): Thank you, Mayor Champion. I also want to thank you for reminding me that I'm not wearing a tie. I actually didn't even realize it until you pointed it out. So if you see me run away to the outlet for a little bit, you'll know why.

Now I'd like to welcome Robert Foster. You have the floor. Please state your name for the record.

Mr. Rob Foster: I'm Rob Foster. I'm a councillor for the region of Niagara, out of the town of Lincoln.

First, thank you to the committee and the province for the opportunity to speak on the issues of governance. To introduce myself, I have been an elected representative of Lincoln for 24 years—the first 18 years as a town councillor, and I'm now into my sixth year at the region. I've been an eight-year board member of the Association of Municipalities of Ontario, having chaired the digital governance committee. I am currently the chair of the Niagara Peninsula Conservation Authority. And finally, my educational background includes a master's in public administration. Between this background and my long career in the private

sector, both in media and health care, I have a wide range of experience that I draw upon to help provide some commentary on the issues here today.

To begin, I personally have been asking two questions about Niagara for some time: What are the problems we really have with governance, and what is it that we want to accomplish if changes are made? Today your committee will hear a wide variety of opinions from the public and various politicians calling for a variety of changes to the structures. Unfortunately, I believe these views presented are very much “the cart before the horse.”

It is expected that Niagara will have many more people living in our communities by 2051—close to a 50% increase in today’s population. If that’s correct, we have an incredible amount of work ahead of us. All municipalities have been experiencing significant growth, and there are many plans in place for the continued expansion of Niagara.

We know and agree with the goal of the provincial government to build more homes, but with this growth will come an inevitable suite of problems. Transportation, water, sewer, public transit, social services, long-term care, homelessness issues, mental health, police, EMS services, ambulances, public health, court services—all will require significant investments in capital and programs.

Further, our asset-management analysis has shown much of our current infrastructure nearing end of life and requiring significant upgrades and/or replacement. From a taxation point of view, this is not a pretty picture. In a way, this is somewhat of a perfect “property tax” storm that is approaching us.

So why do we have a region? It exists to provide a more efficient and coordinated administration of services and resources across all of our municipalities. Decisions are made where investments happen that are ultimately important to the citizens of Niagara. I will use the example of the waste water treatment plant that is slated to be built in Niagara Falls. When you’re looking at a regionally important facility, which potentially could cost in the neighbourhood of \$500 million, it takes a regional tax base to make that happen. Besides the fundamental infrastructure needs, we as local governments are funding areas that are outside of our jurisdiction, which I support, as they require investments to ensure these provincial facilities are built. For example, between the new hospitals in St. Catharines, west Niagara and Niagara Falls, close to \$90 million is being invested by the region for those facilities.

For municipal governments, we have what I call a fiscal imbalance. There’s a huge expectation for the delivery of the needs of housing, but as municipalities, we only have the property tax base to tap for funding. AMO proposed, ahead of the 2018 election, that a new funding partnership should be established for infrastructure needs, which failed to gain traction. To be fair, the current government has made some positive strides in funding down to the local level, but the funding remains not nearly adequate to truly dent the needs. The cost structure of public institutions is dramatically on the rise, which we see with budgets at all levels. The region and the lower-tier municipalities

have recognized the need to make changes and have been engaged in discussion about shared services, but there remains much to be done.

One of the positives of Bill 23 is that it is making changes to the planning process, ensuring new housing in the province can move forward in a clear manner. I believe the process is being established and the relationships with the region, the lower-tier municipalities and the conservation authority here in Niagara have become better defined.

As municipalities—and here is where my opinion now comes in—I believe what we are currently doing we’re doing efficiently, and to be fair, it is a false narrative that municipalities are the ones standing in the way of building more homes, at least from the planning perspective. Using hard numbers, municipalities across Niagara have well over 38,000 housing units on the books already approved and ready to go.

So what do we need from a governance point of view? Is it time for new models or is it time for better focus with what we have?

There are tools and rules available to make changes if communities so desire. The Municipal Act itself has considerable flexibility within it, and section 171 is clear that municipalities can make the case about changes to their structure. It requires proof to the provincial minister that “the restructuring proposal has the prescribed degree of support of the prescribed communities and local bodies in the geographic area.”

For Niagara region, if the goal is to simply to reduce politicians, then we already have opportunities for us from the 2019 Andrew Sancton study that can be explored, providing, of course, there is a political will to do so.

I believe very strongly in a quote from American journalist H.L. Mencken: “For every complex problem, there is an answer that is clear, simple and wrong.” And with that in mind, I come to what I believe should happen.

This committee is a starting point only. It is in the interest of both the province and all of Niagara that we review what is needed, when it is needed, how it will be funded and who is going to take the lead—this is almost a “who does what” reboot. Such a plan must be focused on funding the infrastructure and services needed both to meet the demands of building more homes, but also to fix the identified infrastructure deficit. Such a plan will not nicely fit into the four-year political cycle. It will require a multi-decade model and collective decisions on priorities to make the plan successful. Such a review would undoubtedly lead to tough choices, but sometimes being elected requires making tough decisions.

If you directly ask me if structural change is needed in Niagara, I’m in the camp that would say yes. However, our region is complex, and we owe it to all of us in Niagara not to screw this up. The future can’t be done with vague notions, biased opinions, lack of public input and questionable motives, in some cases. There is no simple solution, and much more work is required to even get the plan around governance that makes sense.

With the region, the lower-tier municipalities and the province working together, I am very confident that a

long-term plan can be developed that truly meets our needs. This should be a recommendation and goal from this committee that we should commit to for 2024. Thank you to the committee for your consideration.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal): Thank you very much, Councillor Foster, for your presentation.

I'd like to move to the official opposition for the first round of questioning. MPP Burch.

Mr. Jeff Burch: Thank you all for your thoughtful presentations. I'm really grateful to be working with a couple of mayors that are really good with working with each other, and I want to build on something that all three of you touched on, which is the difference between just advocating for the status quo and what they would call in business circles "continuous improvement." Chair Bradley touched on this as well. You don't have to bring change—nor is it desirable to go in like a bull in a china shop or do things without having facts or the evidence in front of you. You can continuously change, and we always should be looking for improvements.

I just want to start with you, Bill. You mentioned some really good examples, and I think Port Colborne is known for working with other municipalities. You mentioned the governance system that's under review right now, so you're looking at making improvements there, working with Wainfleet on some things, with Niagara Falls on some things, and there's some really impressive co-operation going on with Welland and Thorold with the multimodal corridor, working with other levels of government. I really appreciate those comments and wonder if you want to expand on that. We are working together, and there are lots of opportunities to work together and make improvements without going down this governance rabbit hole.

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Mr. William Steele: Yes, thanks, Jeff. I appreciate that. You're 100% correct with regards to how Port Colborne is very innovative. Just to give you a little bit more aspect, back in 1998, we embarked on an agreement with the federal government to take over our port, our grain elevator. We worked with CN; we own our own rail system in Port Colborne, which is run by a short rail company. When I became mayor after serving 17 years as a city councillor, we got together with Frank and Terry and Mayor Sendzik, at the time, and we have an agreement, because the canal dissects all our municipalities, to work very hard together with all our marine operators and the federal government. In fact, PA Grewal with transportation Ontario has been apprised of that; I've worked with him on a few things with the marine initiative here in Ontario. So these things can happen.

But again, we're not afraid to say that we need to stand on our own, because technically, we could be our own little city. We have our own sewer plant, our own water plant. We could run things and buy those services that the region should only be looking after, which are police, health care, old age homes, ambulances, things of that nature, but we could take water/sewer back.

We took back the majority of our roads that the region looked at in the past because they were actually municipal streets and didn't have any effect on the region. It didn't affect our taxpayer at all, but what it did do was make more efficiencies—when something went wrong under the ground, it was one organization coming out to fix it, not two arguing whose job it was. But we do work well with other municipalities. I think we can do that. We've talked about library services.

I do want to, if I've got time here, bring back something that was said in the earlier session with regards to, if you had one fire department, you're going to go down to one chief. I'm going to tell you this right now: It doesn't work. You could, but you're going to have a chief, you're going to have X amount of deputies, each deputy is going to have a layer under them and there's going to be a layer under them. Always amalgamation, in certain circumstances, doesn't work. It doesn't.

Yesterday, I was online with the Toronto city budget for 2023—as much as I could get out of their website, which wasn't the greatest, I'll tell you that right now—\$25 million for 25 politicians is what they spend. City of Hamilton, which had a great section on their council, spent about \$6.5 million on their politicians. Niagara, with their 132 or whatever the number may be—I think it's 132—\$4.5 million. Each city councillor in Port Colborne makes \$22,000. I make about \$45,000 as mayor. Although I treat it as a full-time job, I do have my own business that I still have to run, but that's just the way I am as mayor, and I'm sure Frank is the same way in Welland. But it doesn't always help things.

We are embarking on moving our numbers down a bit. We're eight councillors now. Should we go below six? I don't believe that. I think you do need breadth of thought at the table when things are debated. We've embarked in the past on two reviews municipally with totally citizen-led committees with one councillor as a sounding board for answers. Both times they came back: "Do not change ward boundaries. Leave the eight councillors. Our only recommendation: Increase your pay." We have four wards in Port Colborne. They did ward meetings in each ward. They did get good feedback from citizens. They did a couple of surveys. But the only thing they came back with: "Raise your pay. You're not paid enough for the work you do."

Quite frankly, we take calls about the federal government, we take calls for you guys, we take our own calls, and we take calls for the region. We do have one regional councillor as well as myself that serves at the region. We take it all. We're the guys in the grocery store, at the shoe store, at the car lot, at the hockey rink or wherever you may be. We're the ones getting talked to. Quite frankly, upper-tier levels of politicians come in, and yes, they may know people there; they're not pounced upon like we are. I've been doing it for a long time, and I've seen it. I've been in other areas where nobody knows Bill Steele, the mayor of Port Colborne, but I'm with the local politicians at the grassroots level, and that's where the people focus.

Mr. Jeff Burch: I appreciate that, and also the fact that you're the second most successful municipality in Niagara with respect to housing—which is why we should all be here, focusing on that.

I just want to turn to Frank, as well. We'll have more time in the next round. Frank, I think you're right; what I hear and, I think, a lot of people hear around Niagara is that when it comes to getting things done really quickly and getting approvals, Welland is really well known for that. I appreciate the comment that you're looking to get things done and make improvements, but this talk that comes around about amalgamation is always this huge distraction, and then we get all the politics and the egos and everything involved, and it takes away from the real discussion we should be having about making real, continuous improvement and focusing on housing.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal): Twenty seconds.

Mr. Jeff Burch: Welland is one of the most successful places for that. Can you comment on Welland's reputation and how an amalgamation and going down that rabbit hole could disrupt that?

Mr. Frank Champion: I think have four seconds left, so very quickly: We are very good at what we do, and we do that by focusing—I won't use "laser-focus," but we focus on what we need to do. I don't have much more time—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal): Thank you, Mayor Champion. Maybe we can continue that in the next round.

I'd like to move to our independent member. MPP McMahon, you now have the floor.

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: Thank you for your great presentations. I do know well about mayors of small towns. My dad was the mayor of Collingwood in the 1980s, and I dreaded going to Loblaws with him on Friday nights because it was a three-hour ordeal. I vowed at that point in time I would never go into politics ever in my life, so I'm eating those words.

Also, I appreciate what you said about Toronto city councillors, and that is exactly true: Cutting them in half in the middle of an election for no apparent reason did not work, does not work and costs more money. There were no savings. They all doubled their staff to deal with the workload, as you can imagine, in Toronto. So I appreciate that.

I'll start off with questions for William Steele from Port Colborne, since you went first. You say things are working well now. Can you elaborate on that? They shouldn't be touched, we shouldn't be dipping our hands and messing around with your municipality?

Mr. William Steele: Yes. I mean, can there be improvements? Definitely, and we can all work towards that. I congratulate today's government for doing with planning what they did, taking it out of regional hands and putting it down in the municipalities. I think Frank touched on the official plan, on having one official plan for Niagara, which we do, but then we also have our own, so there can

be some conflicts. Having a more common one across Niagara would be better.

But bringing that planning down to the cities—and again, we've seen it. We've got 4,000 housing units ready to roll in the next five years within the city of Port Colborne as we're moving through the different phases of subdivision approvals. We're doing that because the delay at the region has been subsiding. There are a lot less delays. The region does have some really good people up there who can help us; we actually second their services, no different than we do with the NPCA, with those issues. We all work very well together, and things are proceeding at a quicker pace. I like the way that the province came out with deadlines to make sure that municipalities do move faster and not bog things down, and we're doing just that.

But that's the issue: Let us have the tools to move those things forward, like you've done with planning, which needs to still be tweaked a little bit more. We will do it—I won't say "better," but more efficiently, and that's the way it is. We've got a strong planning department of three planners and an assistant, and we're actually talking with our neighbour in Wainfleet to actually combine—not really combine the department, but sit there and take the four people who are within the two municipalities and actually do even more work. Even though Wainfleet is totally agricultural in a rural area—no water, no sewer—they are still seeing a boom in building in large estate lots out there.

But it's a way for us to help each other, and again, with having some common planning practices and rules, we also can work together.

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Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: Great. I have one minute left for my 10 million questions, but I'll just limit it to what you just said to me.

I'm hearing across the board that people are thrilled with planning decisions being able to be made locally, which makes sense. You know your area the best. And you were bragging—I wanted you to brag—about your housing units. I want all of you to brag about that. But you said the planning at the municipal level could be tweaked a little more. What else could be done?

Mr. William Steele: I think, at this point, getting the region totally out of planning—because they still really have their toe in the water. Getting them totally out of planning, allowing us—I think Mayor Champion said it best: where we do facilitate something for the 12 municipalities, that we are on more common ground with a lot of things. That does work well, and those are things that Frank has said before at times.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal): Thirty seconds.

Mr. William Steele: So we do agree with that. Our staff agrees with that.

The other issue is infrastructure funding. The old a third, a third, a third plan that both federal and provincial governments across Canada used, that's gone by the wayside. We really need that infrastructure funding not only to deal with the new infrastructure that's coming in, but to replace the current infrastructure that was put in the

ground, in the case of Port Colborne, back in the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s. Those types of funding programs have kind of gone by the wayside. Now we're really throwing in our applications and hoping—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal): Thank you, Mayor Steele. That concludes our time for the independent member.

I'd now like to move to the government members. MPP Lorne Coe.

Mr. Lorne Coe: Thank you, Chair, and, through you: Welcome, gentlemen, to the standing committee deliberations today.

I served on the Durham regional council for 13 years, locally and on region of Durham council as well. It's that experience that leads me to ask this question, because I think we need to drive down a little bit. I appreciate what you've had to say, but this aligns to some extent to what we've heard earlier about shared services. I'd like to get an answer, starting with Mayor Steele and then with his colleague from Welland: Are there responsibilities and services that could be modified or combined, moved from one level of local government to another, or integrated among existing local governments to support the construction of new homes and the provision of effective local governance?

Now we've already established early in this deliberation that we're laser-focused on getting the 1.5 million homes built. If you could respond to that question.

And I'm sharing my time with MPP Natalia Kusendova-Bashta, Chair. Thank you.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal): MPP Kusendova-Bashta.

Mr. Lorne Coe: No, no. I'm waiting for my answer.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal): Oh, sorry. Sorry about that.

Mr. Lorne Coe: All right. Who wants to go first?

Mr. Frank Campion: Sure. My light is on.

Thanks for that question. I guess we're going to keep emphasizing the same thing here, that we need to get planning out of the hands of the region and put it in the hands of the lower-tier municipalities. That is because, if we want to accelerate housing development and housing permits and housing planning, it really has to stay at one level. What happens currently is, if the region is involved, our team in Welland gets the job done, sends it to the region, and it may be weeks or even months before we get that back. That is a huge delay. It's a bottleneck.

Even dealing with certain types of CIPs—right now the city of Welland has several CIPs that are related to development and building, particularly different types of housing, and if we have a disagreement with the region over the value of the CIP, which happens more often than I'd like to have it happen, it just bogs the whole process down. We need to take that back as well so we're the single source for approvals of CIPs. Even if the region is dealing with it, we need to have one source of having those approved.

I'll leave it at that. There are other services that can come down, particularly infrastructure, but I'll go over to—

Mr. Lorne Coe: Thank you for that.

Mayor Steele, please.

Mr. William Steele: I think Frank said it all on the planning side of life.

I really think the region needs to stay focused. You need a regional government in the big-ticket items: police force, water and sewer plants—as Councillor Foster talked about, there's an almost \$500-million plant in Niagara Falls, which will serve more than just Niagara Falls. It will serve Thorold, parts of Fort Erie etc. It will actually take some pumping stations offline, which is a good thing. Health care, seniors services, public health, ambulances: Those things that need to be region-wide that are such a large dollar ticket today compared to what they were 10, 15, 20, even 50 years ago back to 1970, have all changed. So those things need to stay at a higher level where the population of Niagara can pay for those. But if you want to get things done, you've got to—again, the planning issue. Some infrastructure issues need to be specifically at the 12-municipality level.

Mr. Lorne Coe: Thank you. Regional Councillor Foster, please.

Mr. Rob Foster: Actually, I enjoy listening to these two guys. The key thing in and around planning that they've been talking about, I'm not 100% in total agreement with them. I do believe there are some issues in and around planning that do have to be looked at on a regional point of view, also with the conservation authority and having those things. I'm not really sure this doing away of regulation/doing away of layers and stuff like that is necessarily a great thing at times. One person's doing away with red tape is another person's doing away with environmental controls, if you want to put it that way.

So I think the region still has a strong role within what goes on within the area. There certainly are differing things. And by the way, I wholeheartedly support the provincial government moving more of the planning down to the local area. I agreed with that back when I was a town councillor, and I agree with it now. Anyway, there are lots of things going on.

Mr. Lorne Coe: Thank you very much.

Chair, through you to my colleagues.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal): I'd like to recognize MPP Kusendova-Bashta. You have two minutes remaining.

Ms. Natalia Kusendova-Bashta: Good morning, everyone.

I will address my questions to Mayor Campion. Nice to see you again, Mayor. We saw each other last year for a very exciting groundbreaking ceremony for the Foyer Richelieu Welland, which will be housing a lot of franco-phone long-term-care residents. I know Welland is home to a population of about 10% francophones, and I want to congratulate you that you are always engaging with them. I checked out your website as well, and there is some French-language content on it. So thank you for your leadership in that aspect.

I also wanted to congratulate you on exceeding your housing targets for 2023 by 211%. I think that's absolutely

wonderful, so I think you're doing something right at the city of Welland.

I did check out the Mississauga housing targets in comparison, because that is the area I represent, and the contrast cannot be more stark. For Mississauga, our 10-year housing target is 120,000; in comparison, Welland is 4,300. But for 2023, the city of Mississauga only achieved 2,380 housing starts in comparison to your starts, which are 664. Mississauga is about 14 times the size of Welland, and it only beat your targets by about four times.

So why do you think that is? Tell me, what's the magic that is happening in Welland, and how can we take some of that magic and bring it to Mississauga, where it's much needed?

M. Frank Campion: Il me fait plaisir d'être ici. Merci. I'll do the rest in English, just because most people won't be able to understand.

Yes, as I said, it's a secret but it really isn't. We have been consulted by municipal affairs and housing in the past—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal): Thirty seconds remaining.

Mr. Frank Campion: —asking us those very same questions. Again, it's a matter of being very nimble and being able to, I hate to use the word, pivot. But what we got into initially was, when I became mayor, I said we have to be more entrepreneurial and we have to understand what it means. Time is money, and it's a real fact—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal): Thank you, Mayor. That concludes our time for this round. I've been told I have to run a tighter ship. I tried to tell the Clerk that is what happens when you give a bunch of politicians their own microphones, but it didn't work.

Now, I'd like to move onto the second round of questioning from the official opposition. MPP Jeff Burch.

Mr. Jeff Burch: I was hoping, Frank, you were going to say your MPP was one of the—

Laughter.

Mr. Jeff Burch: I never seriously thought that.

I'm going to go to Regional Councillor Foster. Just on the issue, I thought it was interesting, because I have some experience as a councillor myself during that big spending under the infrastructure program after the 2008 economic situation. There was a creative cluster master plan in St. Catharines, and a really important aspect of that was the Burgoyne Bridge. You talked about the capacity of paying for large projects like that—like waste water plants and whatnot—and having the regional body able to work with the municipalities to make that happen. I just thought you might want to comment on that a little further.

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Mr. Rob Foster: Thank you, Jeff. I would say the thing in and around the region is the fact that we do spread out the cost to make sure that all of us are part of it. Collectively, at the region, we're making those decisions on the things that are really, truly important for the region and all the various pieces of infrastructure.

I'll defer to Mayor Campion, but Welland—our waste water treatment plant needs a replacement there as well.

There are no small amounts of infrastructure costs that are coming down the road with us.

Number one, we need help from the province; there's no question. It's really, truly unfair that we're putting these major infrastructure costs on the backs of property taxpayers. I will be perfectly frank. The provincial government has done a good job of coming up with money, but we've got to do better.

There simply are these things that we have to be spending money on. If we really, truly are going to meet the laser focus of housing as we're going down the road, we simply have to be building the infrastructure to make all of this stuff happen. A region is very good at helping us focus on that type of thing.

Mr. Jeff Burch: It would be difficult to focus on those things if we were going down this road of talking about forced amalgamations and expanding the region, as they discovered in Peel—

Mr. Rob Foster: For sure. I would also say to you that I give full credit to the lower-tier municipalities. They're doing a superb job of focusing in on the planning in and around their municipalities. But those bigger-picture issues that we have to put into play really, truly have to be regional issues.

Mr. Jeff Burch: I just want to go back to Bill and Frank with the issue that hasn't been fully discussed: With Bill 23, there was some revenue lost. It's debatable how much municipalities took a revenue hit; most say it's somewhere between \$3 billion and \$4 billion. The government came up with a program to partially make municipalities whole—I think it's a \$1.2-billion program—which depends on meeting targets for building housing. One of the problems—and we've touched on it—is that the criteria for meeting that is shovels in the ground, or I think, technically, it's foundations poured. Municipalities have no control over that. We've seen, across the region, approvals piling up because the building is slowing down for a variety of reasons.

I wondered if you wanted to comment, first of all, on the formula, which I think is unfair. Maybe the government wants to go back and take a look at how they determine—if you're doing your job with getting all these approvals through, and then the builders aren't building, it's not your fault; you've done your job. So holding that out as a criteria is not really fair to the municipalities.

Secondly, the number of approvals that are out there that are not being acted on: I always use, Bill, from your city—I don't know if you appreciate me doing this, but there is an approval from the 1980s, and the development hasn't been built yet. Builders are using your resources to ask for approvals, and then there's no guideline on when they have to start building. That's a serious problem right now. I'm wondering if you both could comment on that issue.

Mr. William Steele: Thanks for the question. You're talking about the 1980s; we actually were dealing with that last night. The property was sold, and it went through over 30 years of extensions, and the owner just said, "Yes, I want a subdivision, but I don't want to put a shovel in the ground." We actually have a developer now that is

developing around that area, and they will put the shovel in the ground. So we had our first public meeting on that.

One thing we have done with developers is, we have said, “We’ll look at maybe a short-term extension, but we’re not doing the long-terms anymore. We’re going to cut you off, and then you’ll have to reapply and everything else.”

Development charge money: I think the government needs to be a little clearer to our developers and to us, quite frankly, on exactly who applies, who it applies to, who it doesn’t apply to. I have no issues with not charging development charges for affordable and attainable housing. I think that’s very important. It was a good step in that direction. All other developers can pay the development charges. Quite frankly, the homeowner or apartment/condo owner ends up paying those anyways. They don’t seem to have any trouble doing it now.

Aside from inflation—because we always have inflation; it goes up and down like a yo-yo—it’s the interest rates that are killing everyone right now. If you think there’s issues today, you wait until the middle of this year when most of the people that have bought in the last five to eight years, their mortgages are going to be expiring and then they have to go back to renew their mortgages—is when the proverbial hits the fan. You’re going to have what you had in the down years of 2008. I think you’re going to see people walking away from homes in this country like you saw in the US back in those days—a lot worse then in the US than it is here—unless our interest rates are going to start falling. That is key here. That is key to all of this.

Mr. Jeff Burch: Thank you very much.

We have a minute left for Frank, if you want to—

Mr. Frank Campion: One minute. All right. Well, based on our 211%, I’m quite satisfied with the program as it stands. But ask me at the end of 2024. It’s clear that there has to be some offset for that reduction in DCs.

Having said that, we have an affordable housing advisory committee that we formed, and we’ve come up with a CIP, a community improvement plan, for affordable housing, and part of that plan is not charging DCs anyway. So I think what has to happen—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal): Ten seconds left.

Mr. Frank Campion: What has to happen is we have to be able to not fund the DC fund. Normally, when we write it off, we still have to fund that. So we need to have a sort of change in the DC rules so that we can—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal): Thank you, Mayor Campion. That concludes the questioning for the opposition members.

I’d like to now move to the independent member. MPP McMahon, you now have the floor.

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: Thank you very much.

I forgot to ask you, Frank: What’s the population of Welland?

Mr. Frank Campion: It’s exceeding 55,000. It changes daily.

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: All right. And then, I love—feel free to continue bragging about your 211%

there, because that should be on billboards all over your neighbourhood.

I’m assuming that that is all types of housing being built, not just single-family detached homes with the white picket fence, Beaver Cleaver style?

Mr. Frank Campion: Yes. I think that’s a significant question that you ask, because it’s about units—how many units there are. Welland was historically known for single-family dwellings, and that has changed because we need the intensification. It’s hard for municipalities to grasp that, but from a perspective of mayor and council, we see the need for that. We get comments like, “How come they’re building more shelves. Who wants to live on a shelf?” when we’re talking about high-rise apartments. The answer is, “A lot of people.” These are things that people need. We’re finding that people in the city of Welland—seniors, like me, whose children are gone—want to sell their house, but they can’t sell their house because they’ve got nowhere to go.

As soon as an apartment is finished, it’s populated, like immediately. I think our vacancy rate is less than 1%. So that’s really where the development has to happen. That’s controversial with the residents, but it has to happen. People need that type of housing.

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: Great. No cookie-cutter size for everyone.

Then you mentioned that shared services are more about co-operation, which I really liked, that line. Can you give me an example of how Welland is co-operating with others?

Mr. Frank Campion: Sure. Bill has already mentioned that we have a partnership with HOPA, Hamilton-Oshawa Port Authority, for development along our working canal, so the St. Lawrence Seaway canals running through our municipalities. So we’re working together, and that’s the co-operative part. We’re not competing with each other. Bill is doing quite well. They’ve got some docks and seawalls and that sort of thing happening. Terry Ugolini—they’re going gangbusters over there, and we’re happy to support them. And we’re working together to work with the federal government to loosen up the land so we can develop and use them.

So that is probably one of the easiest ones, of co-operative issues, that I can talk about. It’s not shared service, but it’s that co-operation that we need, and ultimately, we’ll come into a service arrangement as well.

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Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: And is there anything good, bad, ugly about the shared services—William can add to that—or any suggestions you have for us about that, any type of arrangements like that?

Mr. Frank Campion: Well, in the past we have had shared service agreements with the city of Thorold as well as Port Colborne, prior to Bill becoming the mayor there, so I think there are opportunities for that. What happens is those talks get bogged down on minutiae sometimes. We’re talking about shared services, so maybe we can have our truck plow a little bit farther down the road or something like that, where it doesn’t have a big impact.

I'm not talking about anything now, but in the past, it kind of could have been disingenuous because it's a matter of just doing it so that we can say we're doing it, as opposed to actually having something significant come of it. I think besides the downside, there's opportunity to improve that. So we continue to look at those things.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal): Thirty seconds remaining.

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: Great.

Can I ask Rob a quick question? Do you feel the intentions of this regional review are clear?

Mr. Rob Foster: Not really. I think we are taking a look at this from a wide variety of perspectives. A lot of people have had a lot of opinions on what's good, bad or indifferent about Niagara for a long time. Niagara has now been here for 54 years. It's a big, complex organization—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal): Thank you, Councillor. That concludes the time for our independent member.

I'd now like to move to the government members. MPP Oosterhoff, you have the floor.

Mr. Sam Oosterhoff: I think, to Councillor Foster's point, it's a bit of a Rorschach test. Whoever sees the committee when they're coming to town might have different ideas that they're bringing forward. I think we're already seeing that in some of the deputations, and I appreciate it because it's a variety of voices and a variety of perspectives.

I have a number of questions, and I'm going to be asking some of them to each of you. I'm also going to be asking one question that I'm going to ask each of you to respond to in turn.

First, I want to ask Mayor Steele—thank you. I've always appreciated working with you and your team, especially on some of the industrial development pieces. As I mentioned earlier, when the regional municipality of Niagara was created in 1970, it was 26 local municipalities and two counties, which became the structure we know. Earlier you said “always amalgamation” doesn't work, and so my question following your logic is, do you think we should go back to 26 municipalities and two counties?

Mr. William Steele: No.

Mr. Sam Oosterhoff: Okay, thank you. So my second question, then: Based on that—we're 54 years later. When you look at the structure, I got the sense that you think the structure is working well. Perhaps there's a chance for some evolution, from your perspective, without really defining what that evolution is, which is, I think, why the committee is here, and I think there's a consensus around the need for evolution. What should it look like in 50 years? I don't want to say you have to be a seer, but I am asking if you think there should be changes and should be evolution. You believe it has worked well for the past 50 years. What needs to happen over the next 50 years?

In 50 years, we're going to be close to a million people. Apparently, according to StatsCan, we passed 500,000 second quarter of last year. We're going to be close to a million people in 50 years—I'm looking at Mayor Campion; I'm going to be speaking with Mayor Junkin

later. You look at Rice Road, you look at Quaker Road—sometimes the lines blur; I didn't get a chance to speak with the Mayor of Thorold about that. But I'm just wondering, when you look at what my grandkids are going to need, do you think this structure is going to meet that, and if not, what changes should happen?

Mr. William Steele: Well, I think a form of the structure will still be here. I think what you're seeing today and what's been said by Mayor Easton with regard to her municipality, along with Grimsby and West Lincoln—I mean, the amalgamation talk came up at the table. With our shared services discussion with Wainfleet, although amalgamation didn't come up, we are talking about library, we are talking about fire, we are talking about planning, we are talking about building inspectors. So those things will evolve over time, like it has since then.

Quite frankly, going back to 1970, there are still some rifts. Fort Erie, when it was formed—Ridgeway and Crystal Beach were adamant to not join Fort Erie. They always wanted to be part of Port Colborne. That didn't happen. But you still talk to the old-timers in Ridgeway and Crystal Beach, and they all still do business at Port Colborne. They cheer for the Port Colborne Sailors. They still wish they were put together with us. That was forced amalgamation, and you're still hearing the ripples from it.

But things do need to change, MPP Oosterhoff. I think it will be change for the best, but I think it needs to come from the grassroots level with support from our provincial government.

Mr. Sam Oosterhoff: Thank you very much.

I have a question for Councillor Foster. You're a regional councillor for the town of Lincoln, a beautiful place. I was born and raised there. I love it. Clinton, Louth and Beamsville, I believe, were originally the three townships that became the town of Lincoln. Is that accurate?

Mr. Rob Foster: Yes.

Mr. Sam Oosterhoff: Currently, of course, wherever you are, in any municipality—you mentioned it, out in Fort Erie—there's always a little bit of a hometown feel, and that's a good thing. If there was a move toward some amalgamation, whether that was a broader one or a smaller subset, do you think that would disappear? Do you think people from Lincoln would forget, all of a sudden, that they live in Jordan or that they live in Beamsville?

Mr. Rob Foster: Lincoln is a bit of an artificial construct that has come together over the years. I moved to Beamsville in 1993, and I've watched the community morph. Today it is far closer than it was at the very beginning. There still are differences with people in the Jordan area versus the Beamsville area. But I would say that we've come a long way as communities, and we're paying attention, as a municipality, to all parts of our municipality, which I think works.

Mr. Sam Oosterhoff: Thank you.

My question that I would like Mayor Campion to speak about—we've spoken before, Mayor, about some of the challenges of interacting with regional staff on certain issues, specifically around planning. I understand that Bill 23 is going to change some of that. From your perspective,

what would be a couple of other services—if you wanted to see functions at the regional level that would be devolved to lower-tier municipalities in one way, shape or form, what would those be?

Mr. Frank Campion: I think one of the obvious ones would be roads, plowing. For us to have a truck go down and stop at a corner because now it becomes a regional road—this becomes much more efficient to do it that way, as opposed to having this all broken up. So I think there's a way to do that, and I think that should happen sooner rather than later.

There are certain things that the region should do—or a hybrid. If we're talking about how we're going to evolve from here, I agree that there are going to be amalgamations; there's going to be change. It's a matter of first finding out who does what best and then allocating those services to those people, and then you can start to come up with a logical reason why you're going to amalgamate certain municipalities and why you may or may not have a region at some point.

The concept of having a hybrid, where we would have a board of management that would oversee various commissions—we have the police commission; we've got water, waste water. We can do all those things, and it can be dealt with on that hybrid level, where we can now say these municipalities are going to merge together because of this, and we're also going to be able to say we can now probably manage all of the bigger services through this other board of management.

Mr. Sam Oosterhoff: Thank you.

My question to all three of you—and I know you hate having questions that kind of preclude different answers, and I understand that and respect that. But if you absolutely had to pick, would you pick a single-tier Niagara governance model with one council, a multi-city model—the four-city model is the one that we hear about—with service boards for shared services, as mentioned, or the current 13-municipality model?

The Acting Chair (Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal): You have 30 seconds remaining.

Mr. Frank Campion: If I had to pick one, it certainly would not be a single municipality right now—

Mr. Sam Oosterhoff: I didn't ask what you wouldn't pick. Which one would you pick?

Mr. Frank Campion: I would say probably the amalgamation to four and the potential elimination of the region.

Mr. Sam Oosterhoff: Mayor Steele?

Mr. William Steele: Based on today, currently—this is my personal opinion, and not of my citizens or my council—I would leave the 12 municipalities and let them work through this at the grassroots level. But I would reduce the number of councillors who sit on regional council.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal): Thank you, Councillor. I apologize, but that concludes our time for today.

I'd like to thank—

Mr. Wayne Gates: Saved by the bell.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal): Yes.

I'd like to thank all three of you for taking the time out today to be here with us to discuss these important topics regarding the region of Niagara.

This concludes our session. We will reconvene at 1 p.m. Thank you, everyone.

The committee recessed from 1209 to 1300.

MR. WAYNE REDEKOP
TOWNSHIP OF WEST LINCOLN
CITY OF NIAGARA FALLS

The Acting Chair (Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal): We'll now resume public hearings on the study on regional governance. I'd like to welcome our presenters today: the town of Fort Erie, the township of West Lincoln and the city of Niagara. If our presenters can make their way up to their seats, please.

I'd like to begin with Mayor Redekop. You now have the floor.

Mr. Wayne Redekop: Is this on?

The Acting Chair (Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal): Yes. Please state your name for the record before you begin.

Mr. Wayne Redekop: My name is Wayne Redekop. I'm the mayor of the town of Fort Erie. I want to thank the standing committee for allowing me to appear and make comments with respect to this matter. I want to make it clear that my comments are my personal comments. These have not been authorized by the council of the town of Fort Erie, although they are informed by authorization in 2019, when we went through a similar process with respect to regional government and the council did pass resolution, and we made presentation to the facilitators at that time.

I have provided each of you with a copy of my brief. I'd like you take a look at the very last page, which is a map of Niagara which outlines where the municipalities are located. It's a bound brief. It also, in grey, highlights the urban boundaries of the municipalities. So you can see that there are some municipalities that have urban boundaries that have merged or touched each other, and then you will see, there are some that are quite outside of the core. Fort Erie, the community I'm from, has an urban boundary that's down in the southeast corner. You'll see the vast distance between the urban boundaries for both Niagara Falls and Port Colborne as well as Welland.

I also wanted to comment that I think we all agree that the focus for the provincial government and the focus, really, for most of the municipalities in Niagara, including the region, has been housing. How do we get the houses in place to accommodate the growing population that is coming to our country?

I'm going to go through the brief very superficially. I hope that you will have an opportunity to read it later, if you're interested in doing so.

And, just by way of background, I wanted to point out that I've been the mayor of the town of Fort Erie in two separate stints. This is my 19th year. There was an eight-year break between 2006 and 2014. I studied political

science, history and law in school. I practised law for 46 years. I've lived in Niagara all of my life, except for the times when I was away studying. So I believe that I have a fairly good handle on the dynamic in Niagara, particularly between the region and the local area municipalities.

I don't want to give you a lesson on the history, but I'm sure all of you know that the region was created in 1970. It was an amalgamation of two counties and the transformation of 26 municipalities into the current 12. At that time, responsibilities were divided between the region and the local area municipalities. Part of the rationale was the region had the tax base to pay for some large infrastructure projects, particularly water and waste water treatment facilities, which I'm sure you're aware are extremely expensive.

Over the years, those responsibilities have been somewhat refined and there's been a lot of sharing of services between local area municipalities themselves, as well as the local area municipalities and the region. It's easier to share those services if you're closely aligned with your neighbour in terms of your urban boundary. But, regardless, as an example, Fort Erie, Pelham and one other municipality shared legal services for a period of time, and there's that type of sharing going on right across Niagara.

The focus of the provincial government's agenda is building new homes quickly, and as I've stated, most of the municipalities, if not all, have bought into that agenda, and we're all taking steps to make sure that we can process the construction. But I want to point out that there seems to be a disconnect between rapidly approving the construction of new homes and the actual construction of those new homes. Municipalities are legally responsible for receiving and processing applications to construct, and it's the builders and developers who are responsible for actually putting the shovels in the ground.

I'm somewhat fascinated by the general misunderstanding of the complexity of the process between an application to build a subdivision or a house within a subdivision and the actual shovel in the ground, and what goes on between all of that, the length of time it takes to do that, and the fundamental infrastructure that's necessary in order for a house to be built. Even if the infrastructure is available, there are situations where the existing infrastructure is not capable of managing the new homes. As an example, if you are given an approval for a subdivision and you apply for building permits once you've got your site serviced, unless there's capacity at the waste water treatment plant, you can't get a building permit. Unless you can get the sewage from your subdivision through a pumping station to a sewage treatment plant, you can't get a building permit. Some of those pumping stations are local; some of them are regional. The sewer lines are typically local area municipality—the main trunks would be regional. So there's a vast issue right there.

There are municipalities in Niagara that have been putting holding provisions on development approvals simply because the infrastructure has not been adequate.

That gets me to the other aspect, which is a bit broader, and that's the requirement that has been in place for several years now that all municipalities have to have an asset

management plan. That asset management plan identifies your infrastructure; it identifies the value and the cost of that infrastructure, particularly the cost of renewing it; and it requires a financial plan to show how you're going to renew that infrastructure, which is fundamental for growth.

I'm proud to say that the town of Fort Erie bridged what's called the infrastructure gap in 2022. I don't know if there are any other municipalities in Ontario that have done that; there are none in Niagara.

My point is that if you haven't got an infrastructure asset management plan that's going to be funded, you're going to have difficulties in the long term in meeting growth projections—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal): Thank you, Mayor Redekop. That concludes our time for the presentation.

I'd like to now go to the township of West Lincoln and Mayor Cheryl Ganann.

Ms. Cheryl Ganann: Good afternoon, members of the committee. Thank you so much for the opportunity to address you today. My name is Cheryl Ganann. I'm the mayor of the township of West Lincoln. I'm sitting beside an experienced mayor on either side, so I certainly will concur with many of the things that they said in terms of infrastructure and getting houses built. However, I am relatively new, so I have with me this afternoon our director of finance and treasurer, Donna DeFilippis; our director of public works and recreation, Mike DiPaola; and our director of planning and building, Brian Treble. If there are specific questions, I'm sure that they'd be happy to answer them.

West Lincoln is the most westerly municipality in Niagara region and, as such, shares boundaries with the city of Hamilton; Haldimand county; the towns of Grimsby, Lincoln and Pelham; and the township of Wainfleet.

I've provided each of you with a copy of a report regarding West Lincoln's perspective on each of the three governance scenarios that we have been hearing about, the first being to maintain the status quo regarding Niagara region—we've made comments and have included some suggestions, from our perspective, regarding proposed changes to that relationship; the second being the suggestion of one city of Niagara, which we do not support at all, as we feel that a small outlying municipality such as ours would most definitely lose not only its identity, but its ability to control its own destiny; and the third scenario being a multi-city model with what is being referred to as west Niagara—a combined Lincoln, Grimsby and West Lincoln entity—being one of those proposed cities.

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The report provides detailed information about West Lincoln, which although being geographically the largest municipality in Niagara region, with a land area of close to 388 square kilometres, is one of the smaller populated Niagara municipalities, sitting at 16,370. We have a substantial agricultural sector, which our goal is to protect, dotted by several small hamlets, with the town of Smithville being the largest urban centre and therefore the area where projected growth is to take place. Smithville itself

is expected to be approximately 29,000, with West Lincoln as a whole expected to be over 38,000 residents by 2051.

Currently, as of January 2024, the status quo scenario regarding Niagara region most appeals to many of our residents and some of our councillors. The two-tier structure is appropriate at this time, although it could and should be strengthened by refined municipal service delivery and good governance at both upper- and lower-tier levels. The township provides very good value for money in terms of services, programs and assets. Our residents expect and receive local, accessible front-line government.

Circa 2015, with regional support, a land swap brought an additional 100 hectares into the urban boundary of Smithville, thus providing an additional supply of land for building homes to take us out to approximately 2025. West Lincoln and the region began in 2018-19 to work together on what has now materialized to be an urban boundary expansion of the town of Smithville, thus allowing for growth that will achieve regional and provincial growth targets, avoid greenbelt lands and also protect specialty crop areas. Although the growth of Smithville being proposed is small by some standards, the potential for more than 8,000 new homes is significant on a local scale.

Although the current position of West Lincoln is to support the existing governance model, that the region of Niagara remain in place but continue to improve upon a cost-effective delivery of services to residents, we realize that this may not be the best approach for our residents as we move toward the future. As we sit on the cusp of our town of Smithville, with its approximately 7,000 residents—expected to quadruple in size, and an overall growth projection for West Lincoln expected to almost triple by 2051—and, additionally, as we see the obvious need for more housing not only in West Lincoln but throughout the province, we know that, as a municipal council, we must be open to change in governance structure.

If it is the will of this standing committee to suggest that changes in Niagara should be made, and if the provincial government in turn decides to do so, then we feel strongly that we would best serve our residents by being aligned with our neighbours the town of Grimsby and the town of Lincoln—that is to say, the creation of a multi-city model, with west Niagara becoming one of those cities.

Together, our three municipalities have already worked towards, advocated for and incorporated changes to how we deliver services. As I am sure that Lincoln mayor Sandra Easton has already pointed out to you this morning and as will no doubt be reiterated later this afternoon by Grimsby's mayor, Jeff Jordan, together we have already achieved several successful shared endeavours. Our report contains several examples, but to highlight a few:

Our unified efforts have resulted in the building of a new hospital, currently under construction in Grimsby, with the region and each of our three catchment municipalities committed to our own local funding share.

The three municipalities share a single hospice, McNally House. Each municipality has made a financial

commitment to the current expansion campaign so as to increase the number of hospice beds and palliative services available to our residents.

A new mega-high school recently opened, in the fall of 2023, to service the three municipalities. It has been named, aptly, West Niagara Secondary School. Residents of our three municipalities have each contributed financially to the live theatre/auditorium, which will be available for use by the public.

Each of our lower-tier municipalities is closest to the people we represent in the west Niagara area, and each is the first point of contact for our residents.

We don't have all the "how to proceed" answers, but based on past experience, we believe that there are logical connections between the three of us and will therefore continue to explore options for improved service delivery and governance, including more efficient decision-making.

West Lincoln finds itself in a rather unique position. Retaining the status quo with the Niagara region is thought to be our best option based on our current situation. However, our council recognizes that being posed for this explosive growth, coupled with the housing potential within our existing and approved urban boundary expansion areas, requires that we be open-minded about our future and what could potentially be best for our current and future residents.

I restate that if, through the work of this standing committee, it is determined that a change in governance structure in Niagara region should be made, the west Niagara scenario, one municipality of potentially 100,000 residents, is the best choice for West Lincoln's future.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal): Thirty seconds remaining.

Ms. Cheryl Ganann: With both Grimsby and Lincoln moving steadily closer to being built out due to geographic constraints, West Lincoln would round out this future new municipality's availability to continue building a wide variety of homes. The downside to available land, however, is the inability for a small municipality to be able to fund the necessary water and waste water infrastructure to allow for currently approved and future housing starts to take place.

We recognize and support that this provincial government has identified housing as a priority—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal): Thank you, Mayor Ganann. That concludes the time allotted for the presentation today.

I'd like to now welcome the city of Niagara mayor, Jim Diodati. You have the floor.

Mr. Jim Diodati: My name is Jim Diodati. I've been the mayor of Niagara Falls—I'm in my 14th year, also a member of regional council for those years, and before that, two terms as city councillor in Niagara Falls. Prior to that, I worked for myself for 25 years as an entrepreneur. Obviously, I come from the business world, now into the political world.

Thank you very much for all of you being here today. This is very important to us. This is not a new issue. This has been discussed for many decades. It has been studied.

It has been debated. We're hoping that we're at a point now that we're going to actually make some changes.

To make an omelette, you have to break a few eggs. That's just the way that it is. Anyone looking at best practices or good governance realizes that the optimal board size is eight to 10 members. At the region, we have 32 members, and I wouldn't call that good governance. The problem is that it's hard to make decisions with too many cooks in the kitchen. There's an old saying that a camel is just a horse designed by a committee, and I suggest to you that we're experts at designing camels. The problem is too many people making too many decisions. Here in the region of Niagara, we have 126 municipal politicians—126—yet up the highway in Hamilton, where they've got a bigger population, they do it with 16; Toronto has 10 times the population, but they do it with 26. Why do we need 126 municipal politicians? It's not just the \$3.5 million to \$4 million a year it costs for these politicians; it's too many cooks in the kitchen. And I've never heard anyone say the solution to this problem is that we need to bring in more politicians.

So here we are with this situation. The more partners you have, the more difficult it is to have a partnership. Oftentimes, a lot of people don't even know who all of our regional councillors are, nor what regional government does.

I'm going to tell you a little story. George Bailey used to be a regional councillor in Niagara Falls. Originally, he was elected the first time without even running a campaign, because he had a good brand, a good name in our community. Then he was re-elected in the exact same way. Well, George made a decision to not run again. I remember I went to him and said, "George, why aren't you running?" He said, "Do you know why, Jim? I feel guilty cashing my cheque. I feel like the Maytag repairman. Nobody even knows what I do. Nobody calls me. I'm not comfortable doing this." He stepped out of politics, just like that.

Unfortunately, that's the scenario we're dealing with. Typically, municipal politicians are up close and personal; we're the closest to the people. But in Niagara, we've got 13 governments—one regional and 12 municipalities—and that means 13 sets of rules, 13 sets of bylaws, 13 rules on DCs, 13 CAOs, and so on. What does that lead to? Overlap, duplication, red tape. In business, time is money, and we use up too much time, which costs too much money. I would suggest to you that the overlap, the duplication, is impeding business. Businesses that come here don't want to invest because you've got to have a whole new set of rules every time you move to another community or try to expand.

Let's look at the outcome. After 54 years, how are we making out? Well, I'll tell you. A former regional chair said to me, "In Niagara, we're older, sicker, poorer and less educated." You tell me: Are we going in the right direction, or do we need to turn this ship around? There's a war right now on talent; there's cannibalism in Niagara for talent, for senior staff. If you're an engineer, if you're

an accountant or a CAO, if you're any kind of a professional, we're all competing. This is like free agency gone wild. We're paying, competing, cannibalizing. And what's happening now? Compression. We're paying more and more to manage our cities.

Some people have suggested a one-city model, which I don't support, and I do have a number of concerns. I do believe that one day we will be one city. I do believe that, but I think we're 50 years out or more. Here it has been 54 years since the last governance when we made changes in Niagara.

I think that the mayor to my right suggested and made a good point: There's a big difference between urban and rural. With urban, we look at downtowns, brownfields, redevelopment, CIPs. With rural, they're looking at farming and these types of issues where we need to focus on the differences.

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One city, I believe—it's different here because we've got huge geography between cities. We've got a lot of rural areas between our cities, whereas Burlington, Oakville, Mississauga, Etobicoke—you don't know when one city begins and one city ends; it's continuous. It's not like that here in Niagara.

Someone said to me, "Well, if you're going to be one city, why don't you get it over with and just do it?" I said, "Well, that's like saying you've got a toddler and they're going to be an adult. Just give them adult shoes, boots and coats, and let's just let them start wearing it now." It doesn't make sense. You'd never do it. So why would we even be considering it at this point for Niagara?

The four-city model is the one that I support, and I think it respects the uniqueness and the commonalities that we have between municipalities. It respects Niagara West being rural and the type of issues they need to deal with and the urban centres on the other side. I also believe the idea of four cities is better than one because we have competition between municipalities instead of having a monopoly on government.

I have a question for everybody to answer. If you had a barn and you had problems with mice and I gave you a choice: Do you want one fat cat to help you out or do you want four hungry cats? What's going to be more effective? I would say there's not a right and wrong; there's an effective and ineffective, and we know the answer. We know the answer.

By the way, some people have said, "I like things the way they are. I don't want to see any change." Well, I've got news for those people: Your municipality is currently a product of continuous evolution. It was mentioned earlier: We were 28 municipal bodies; now we're 13. I support going to four. It's obvious that we're going in the same direction, but you don't lose your identity. We still refer to all these hamlets and these towns and these areas. In Niagara Falls, it's Chippawa—and every community has got those areas that have not lost their uniqueness.

Even the home builders' association CEO said they completely support the direction that we're going in, and they're the ones building the homes. They said this is an

impediment, the way it is currently. The four-city model works best for what they're looking for.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal): Thirty seconds.

Mr. Jim Diodati: When you're 100,000 people in a city, you don't rely on shared services, and you're considered a big city by the province. I think it makes more efficiencies and synergies. And to recap, currently we're over-governed. Two levels are too expensive. Less is more, and four cities is the sweet spot.

I want to thank all of you for coming out today and considering our proposals.

Interruption.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal): Thank you, Mayor, for your remarks.

I'd like to start with the first session of questioning for the official opposition, and that will be MPP Wayne Gates.

Mr. Wayne Gates: It's always nice to have your family here so they can clap for you. I think that's good too. I see, Jim, you've brought your family with you, so that's good.

First of all, I want to thank you all for being here. Obviously, it's very important to me, as the MPP that represents Niagara Falls and Fort Erie, to get some of the answers here, because I sat through this this morning and I'm still not sure, quite frankly, why we're here. Are we here to talk about housing and the crisis that we have in housing and the affordability, or are we here to talk about amalgamation? What's important right now today on what we have to do? I put together a few questions on that, and the first one I'll send to Mayor Redekop and then Mayor Jim could also answer.

A lot has been discussed publicly about the need to amalgamate to reduce politicians and reduce costs. I know that tax rates are a big concern after residents saw sizable increases in their property taxes recently. However, there seems to be a large amount of evidence that cost savings are very rarely achieved. Several have reviewed previous amalgamations in the US, in Quebec and in Ontario and found little-to-no cost savings as a result. Do you think Niagara will be different this time and why?

I'll start with Mayor Redekop, then Mayor Diodati.

Mr. Wayne Redekop: In my view, the answer is, no, it won't be different. I can tell you that history is the proof of that, and this goes all the way back to an amalgamation 120 years ago in New York City.

But the purpose of this committee, as I understand it—the reason why this matter was referred to this standing committee—is best outlined in the letter that the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing sent to this committee. I think it's the second or third paragraph. He states, "I am mindful of the need to provide stability, transparency and continuity for local governments as they work to meet their housing targets—even as we ensure that existing structures are not standing in the way of getting homes built."

That's the focus: new homes. That's why we're here, and I would suggest that there's not one new home that will be constructed if there are any governance changes in

Niagara. I state that because right now all of the municipalities are meeting the targets outlined, I believe, in Bill 109 that put very stringent time frames on municipalities processing development proposals.

In Fort Erie, and I refer to this in my brief—I've answered all four questions that the minister has put to this committee. In my brief, I've made reference to that. In Fort Erie, as an example, between 2019 and 2023, we approved about 1,200 residential housing units. Of those 1,200 units, about 20% have been built. All the other building permits that were issued during that period of time were in connection with housing units that have been approved prior to that, so there is a time lag between approvals and building permits.

I think it's fair to say that there has been a slowdown in housing construction over the last year or so, primarily because of high interest rates, escalating construction costs and the reluctance of developers and builders—no kidding—to take on risk. Why would they? That's a challenge that I think local municipalities cannot address. The provincial government may be able to. One of the ways you may be able to do that is to put some policies in place that will incentivize builders and developers to build once they've got the approvals; to put a sunset clause in so that after a certain period of time, an approval of a subdivision can be withdrawn if there is no activity; to incentivize builders and municipalities to feed into exactly what it is you want done in terms of new homes.

This isn't just local municipalities. As I say, amalgamations, reductions in the number of municipalities, elimination of regional government—that's not going to build a house. That will not get the builders to take on the risk. It does not change the interest rates, and it doesn't alter the costs of construction. Sorry to wander off your question, but I thought I'd get that out there. That's in paragraph 16 of my brief.

I would also refer you to paragraph 21, where I've outlined seven suggestions that I have on how you can move forward with getting more homes built.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal): Mayor Diodati?

Mr. Jim Diodati: I respectfully disagree with my colleague. Yes, we approve the building. It's like we build the garden, and then we wait for the farmers to plant the seeds. We make a fertile environment where they want to invest. The problem here is that we're not doing that because of the reasons I explained: the red tape—I don't know how many times I need to go through and repeat what the challenges are—the overlap, the duplication.

Governance will directly affect how many houses we build. Yes, we're approving them, but why aren't they building them? We can blame the economy all day long, but why don't we ask the people who build, instead of us politicians who don't build houses—like the home builders' association, who tells us our governance model is an impediment to building. The biggest problem right now that we can actually control—we can't control interest rates and we can't control inflation, but we can control the governance model to have a fertile environment so that

developers want to come to Niagara. We can say we're open for business all day long. You don't say it; you show it.

That's why I'm standing by—this is not easy for us to say, that we need to have less politicians. It doesn't make us popular at the region. But I'm telling you, I'm here because that's what needs to be said. I don't want to tell people what they want to hear; I tell them what they need to hear. And this is what's wrong. I think if you went to your doctor, you'd want nothing less than honesty about what's wrong and what you've got to do to fix it. I think we articulated exactly what, and it's supported by those building the houses.

The problem is supply and demand. We don't have enough houses, so the price of houses is through the roof. The price of rental is through the roof. We've got a housing and affordability problem right now, in addition to other challenges. The front page of the paper today talked about it. So what are we going to do about it? This is something we can change.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal): You have 30 seconds remaining.

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Mr. Wayne Gates: Okay, I've only got 30 seconds. I'll have more questions for you. You guys are both long-winded. But I have a number of questions here.

The reality, when you talk about the Ontario Home Builders' Association—it was reported today by the regional councillor: There are 39,200 approved today that could be built today. Why are they not being built? That's a 10-to-11-year supply of housing, when we're in a crisis—probably the biggest crisis we've had, certainly in my lifetime, particularly for young people and young families who want to get started—but it's not because we need to amalgamate. What we need to do—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal): Thank you, MPP Gates. That concludes our time for the official opposition.

We'll move on to our independent member. MPP McMahon, you now have the floor.

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: For an outsider coming up to your beautiful neighbourhood, this is the bomb. This is fantastic. I give you full accolades for doing that map. I think we should have that everywhere.

I was wondering if you could continue your thoughts, because you got cut off a bit, but you're going to have to be a bit more succinct when you do so.

Mr. Wayne Redekop: I told you I'm a lawyer. Chair, you gave my friends here the 30-second warning; I didn't get that.

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: Well, now you have it.

Mr. Wayne Redekop: Now I have it.

Paragraph 21 of my brief outlines some recommendations that I have with respect to things that can be done.

Chair, (1) has to do with the province fully implementing the provisions of Bill 23 that relate to regional planning. If you want to avoid some duplication, don't have the region involved in planning that the local municipalities can do. The one exception might be the official

plan, because the official plan encompasses the whole region and sets an established plan for the future with respect to growth. It shouldn't be necessary, though, for a builder or a developer to apply for an amendment to both a local official plan and a regional official plan; just leave it to the region to comment on an application to the local municipality.

(2) The local area municipalities and the regions can continue to collaborate on sharing services. I've indicated that there are even some planning services that some of the larger municipalities could provide to the smaller municipalities.

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: Can I get some specifics on that?

Mr. Wayne Redekop: Yes. As I point out in my brief, the town of Fort Erie has an environmental planner; I think we might be the only one in Niagara, other than the region, that does. So if there are environmental planning issues and we have available time from our planner, we could do that. The larger municipalities could also assist the smaller municipalities with respect to secondary planning. Right now, the region is doing some of that. Again, that's another opportunity. If the region was out of planning, by and large, that would free up some personnel for the area municipalities.

(3) The province has mandated uniform building permit application forms, so mandate uniform development application forms for all forms of approvals—subdivisions, severances, site plans, the whole thing.

(4) There's this issue about development charges. I'm not going to get into that. There were some big changes made with respect to that. That has an impact on municipalities' ability to provide the infrastructure, which I mentioned before, that's necessary for growth. I point out in my brief that the provincial government's focus is building new homes. I get that. The communities are interested in building livable communities. Each of the municipalities wants to make sure that we've got all the infrastructure necessary, that we've got the school capacity, the health care services, the parks, the recreation. That's what we're trying to do.

Despite what my friend Mayor Diodati says, the 12 municipalities have differing roots. We all come from different places, and we all value things differently.

In Fort Erie, natural heritage is a big issue. It's very important for us to protect our natural heritage. That's why we have an environmental planner. That's why we have an accessibility advisory committee. That's why, when developers put forward proposals, we're making sure that they protect our natural heritage.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal): You have 30 seconds remaining.

Mr. Wayne Redekop: Not all municipalities agree with that.

Then, (5), (6) and (7) are outlined in paragraph 21.

Thank you very much for the question.

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: Thank you for being a leader in environmental sustainability, it sounds like,

especially in a climate emergency. I think that's fantastic. Thanks for coming in today.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal): Thank you, MPP McMahon.

I would now like to move to the government side with MPP Sam Oosterhoff.

Mr. Sam Oosterhoff: Thanks to the presenters this afternoon. I want to, first of all, appreciate the work that you're doing in your municipalities. I've appreciated working with you over the years as well.

Mayor Redekop, I'm not a lawyer, but I'm going to cut you off if you go too long, because I have a lot of questions. So I apologize in advance.

I'm going to start with Mayor Redekop. I really appreciated your brief. In your brief, you mention on page 2 a sharing of services that takes place between divergent local area municipalities and the region, and I'm just wondering if you could perhaps delineate very quickly a few of the things that you think you've seen increased shared services on.

Mr. Wayne Redekop: The one that I mentioned during my comments was shared legal services. I know that that goes on now between some of the local area municipalities and the region. There are opportunities for digital services sharing, and I know that that's going on right now as well. I believe, in west Niagara, there is some fire services sharing that takes place. So there are a number of things that are going on.

You know, it's surprising to me—

Mr. Sam Oosterhoff: Sorry. That's perfect, because then you listed them, and I appreciate a number of them.

One of the next pieces you mention is the Niagara Transit Commission—something that happened. I'm just wondering: We heard earlier from Mayor Steele that that took 20 years to come into place. It took 20 years to get Niagara regional transit. Why do you think that took 20 years?

Mr. Wayne Redekop: Well, it took 20 years because the three largest municipalities had conventional services some time ago. Fort Erie also had a conventional service on a smaller scale. But none of the other municipalities had a service. As the population grew, as health services became more concentrated, it became more and more imperative for there to be a system that could provide transportation for people from one municipality to the other. So it took a lot longer because some of the municipalities didn't see the need.

As time progressed, they did, and I think that's what will eventually happen in terms of governance.

Mr. Sam Oosterhoff: Okay, thank you.

Going back to 1970 when we saw the changes that came into effect, from 20 lower-tier to 12 and two to—I didn't see them. No, I didn't see them at all. But I've seen the effects of them, and here we are 54 years later, a lot of changes have happened, and I think we'll see more changes over the years to come. Obviously, those changes were brought in for a reason.

I hear your satisfaction with the status quo. I think a lot of people at that time—if you had asked them, in 1970 or

1968 or 1969, "How are things working?" I think you would have had a lot of people who said, "Aw, you know, it's fine. We're here. I've lived here my whole life. Things are just trucking along the way they truck along—no changes necessary." But the reality is now, we look back, and we see that those changes were necessary to enable us to have some of the advantages that we have here today.

I wonder, when we're looking at some of the potential conversations that are happening around governance, is there enough appetite? If there aren't changes that this committee recommends, if there aren't decisions that the government brings forward through legislation, is there an appetite for the governance changes that you're talking about, organically? Because to me, it doesn't feel like that. It feels like, in 2019, we had people come through; they met with all the local, lower-tier municipalities. All the lower-tier municipalities in the region said, "Pretty please, if you just leave us alone, we will be so efficient. We will cut all our red tape and we will never have another problem. Just don't do anything and we will do it ourselves." They left and here we are now, five years later, and it feels as though very little has changed.

So do you think there's actually an appetite for that change without either forced amalgamations or shared services?

Mr. Wayne Redekop: Well, my brief also addresses the issue of governance changes. In my view, if you're going to make changes of the magnitude that we're talking about, that's going to have the implications that we're talking about. Because if you're eliminating a region, or if you're compelling amalgamations, you're talking about employment issues, you're talking about contract issues, you're talking about a whole variety of costs, and if you haven't identified exactly what it is you're hoping to accomplish—and I know you say red tape. My friend Mayor Diodati has also mentioned overlapping and duplication.

Tell us what they are. Tell us what they are, and if your focus here as a committee is building more homes more quickly, tell me, what is the overlap and the duplication and the red tape that's actually holding that up? Because, with all due respect, this idea about changing governance right now is an answer looking for a problem. What is the problem?

Mr. Sam Oosterhoff: So I'm going to ask a question on that, actually. Over to Mayor Ganann: Mayor Ganann, I asked Mayor Easton a similar question this morning. I had a builder recently come and say that they're building homes in West Lincoln and in Lincoln. These are homes out in the countryside, and they noticed that there's different septic requirements on one side of Fly Road on the north side and on the south side. And they're trying to figure out—they said, "When we go to town in West Lincoln, we have a certain requirement." I think the grade was 1% or something and then 2% grade on Lincoln on the other side of the road, and they said, "It's just making it very frustrating when we're trying to build homes, trying to put in place the infrastructure that's needed."

So I understand the support for the status quo from your council and that's what you've clarified, but I'm wondering, is there going to be a change that we're going to see that's actually going to streamline some of these duplications or at least get rid of the inconsistencies if there isn't support for changes?

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Ms. Cheryl Ganann: Thank you for that question. I will start by saying that part of those differences would also have a great deal to do with the geographical differences between West Lincoln, being on top of the escarpment with basically clay-based soil, and the other two municipalities—because, you may also hear this afternoon, there's a difference with Grimsby, being part of the original base of the lake that used to come to the edge of the escarpment. So there's a lot of sandy, beautiful, silty soil there that is extremely different from what we experience. Having lived in the community for 50 years, I will tell you that that very much would affect some of those actual decisions made by the engineers. I don't know that that's the precise answer, but that's certainly one of the things that we regularly have to deal with.

There are similarities because each of our areas has a concentrated area of urban—what you would call somewhat urban—surrounded by a lot of countryside. We have more of that, certainly, because we're not confined quite the same way. Our boundary is larger, our landmass is larger, but we still are dotted. We have this area dotted with hamlets, and with each of those, the soil is somewhat a little bit different. So sometimes it's the very specifics of what it is that somebody wants to do that causes the issue.

We would need to be looking at plugging those together moving forward and make sure that whatever plans came forward, if this were to happen, would certainly be easily handled by somebody who is looking to do that, but—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal): Thirty seconds remaining.

Mr. Sam Oosterhoff: Sorry—just because I want to make sure I ask another question.

Ms. Cheryl Ganann: Okay, go ahead.

Mr. Sam Oosterhoff: This morning as well we talked about that we're seeing shared services between Pelham and Lincoln, we've seen shared services on fire in different places, and I asked the question, why aren't other municipalities doing things like that? And I just ask you: What is holding back a place like West Lincoln from combining library services or fire, or other places? I want to know, what's the hold-up?

Ms. Cheryl Ganann: Currently nothing is holding back in terms of libraries—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal): Thank you, Mayor. Maybe we can continue this in the second round of questioning.

I'd like to pass it back to the official opposition members. MPP Wayne Gates, you have the floor.

Mr. Wayne Gates: I just want to say a couple of comments around what my colleagues on the other side—they said nothing has really changed in Niagara. I'm going to disagree. I got elected in 2014, when we were able to get

a planning grant that started a brand new hospital. It took a long time to get to the point where shovels were in the ground, but that's where Niagara came together on the planning grant and on one direction in getting a new hospital built.

We used to come—everybody used to come to Queen's Park. They'd have hotdogs on the front lawn. You'd come with 27 asks and get nothing done, they tap you on the bum and tell you to go home, and nothing gets done at all. What happened is, they came with one ask where every municipality worked together on the GO train. Now, we've been very successful with the GO train. Obviously, the government has played a role in that, even though we need all-day, two-way GO all the way.

And then, the one I think we should all be proud about, just for the legacy, is the Canada Summer Games, where we all came. I remember going to the Toronto university when they made that announcement that Niagara got the Canada Summer Games, and what an incredible success that was. So things have changed on working together, quite frankly, in Niagara.

This one here is to Mayor Diodati. I'll let him answer it and then I'll go on to a couple of others. We know the primary goal from this government from the perspective of municipal government reform is to increase the speed at which housing is built, and that should be the focus here today. However, we've seen here in Niagara and likely across Ontario that there are multiple barriers to housing builds that are out of hands of the municipalities.

And the reason why I chose this is—I'm going to quote a Niagara Falls councillor, Victor Pietrangelo, who said the following in the local paper. It was in the paper: "We can approve them, but we can't ensure that they're going to be built. I don't know that the incentive that the province is offering is enough to ensure that they are going to get built. It's nice to have a plan, it's better if it's realistic and achievable and I just don't know how we" can make that if it isn't achievable.

At the same time, Mayor Diodati was in the paper. He said the following: "Currently, the high interest rates and inflation has put a damper on construction. We're ready to go. We're all ramped up. We brought on extra staff, we put in extra processes to make things go smoothly, but, at the end of the day, it's up to the developers to get the shovels in the ground."

Could the mayors on the panel discuss those challenges for housing that they cannot control? What are your solutions? I'll go back to that 39,000 homes are ready to be built today, a 10-to-11-year supply. How do we get shovels in the ground with the help of the government?

Mr. Jim Diodati: I appreciate the question. The number one thing, and I've suggested this to the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing: We need sunset clauses on approval, which does not currently exist. I know that Mayor Redekop referenced it. It does not exist. We cannot remove approvals. And if we could, there's your incentive—the incentive of taking away an approval. Because what happens is a lot of developers will upzone property. They land bank it, and they borrow against it. The problem is a

lot of them are sitting on sanitized land they don't intend to build on. Remove the approval with a sunset clause. That's the first thing.

Second thing: You go talk to the people building the houses—which I did. Again, none of us around here are building houses. I went to the home builders' association, and they said—they said, not me—the problem with housing we're not building is because of the governance, because of the red tape, because of the challenges. So on our end, we're approving them, but the developers aren't building them. You've got external issues with interest rates and inflation, of course. Then, you've got internal issues that I just spoke of. They're saying the red tape is an impediment.

Again, talk to the builders. They're the ones that are telling us what the problem is. I'm not saying that is the only solution or the panacea, but it is one of the most significant solutions that we can actually control.

Mr. Wayne Gates: I appreciate your response, but in fairness, on the red tape, I'd need to have some examples, because they've already been approved. Thirty-nine thousand have been approved. We could put shovels in the ground tomorrow. That's not red tape. That has been approved by regional council. Your council, I know, has got thousands—I think it's around 8,000; I don't have the exact number, Mayor. So I just wanted to say that.

On the sunset clause, on our side from the NDP, we've been pushing this for a number of years. We fully agree that we should have a sunset clause so developers don't hang on. We saw an example today: From 1980, they have kept onto the land for—that's, what, 30 or 40 years? I agree 100% that a sunset clause should be there.

This is to Mayor Redekop. I know the town of Fort Erie has several concerns regarding Bill 23. How would it affect the function of their municipality? Could the mayor of Fort Erie discuss those concerns?

Mr. Wayne Redekop: The first item—and I'm just going back to paragraph 21 of my brief. I mentioned the provisions of Bill 23 that deal with removing planning responsibilities from the region. The only thing that I think the region should be involved in is monitoring the official plan to ensure that there's a continuation of conformity across the region for an official plan, which identifies where the region is going to grow and how it's going to grow.

Beyond that, the province should proceed to put in place all the other provisions. Then, the region is out. That frees up personnel.

In terms of the development charges, there really should be a review of that, in my view, because that's what municipalities rely upon in order to provide the amenities for the community and, in some cases, the essential infrastructure for housing to be built. So that would be another area. The council of the town of Fort Erie received a lengthy report with respect to this issue, and we did communicate with the province outlining what our concerns are, so—I don't want to take up all of your time.

Mr. Wayne Gates: I appreciate that, because I think, in fairness, I'd like to let our mayor from West Lincoln—I want to tell you that I agree 100% with you. You made a

statement earlier. We must protect our agricultural land. It has to be protected, the same thing like our greenbelt had to be protected. If we can't feed this province or this country at all, we're going to be in bad shape. I give you a commitment: I'll continue to do that as an MPP, although I don't represent your area, but I'm sure your MPP feels the same way.

This question is aimed at both the small-town mayors. How do you feel amalgamation would affect the voice of your community? Are there unique concerns and needs within your communities that can get ignored if forced into an amalgamation model?

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The Acting Chair (Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal): Thirty seconds remaining.

Mr. Wayne Gates: I'll start with West Lincoln.

Ms. Cheryl Ganann: I think that's a major concern, and that's one of the reasons that our council directed me, in our presentation today, to talk about the status quo currently suiting us. Everybody is very concerned—especially when you're an outlying area like we are, a long way from St. Catharines. Even to drive through one end of West Lincoln to the other, you're talking about half an hour to just do that drive. So, obviously, people who have lived there for generations are concerned—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal): Thank you, Mayor Ganann. That concludes our time allotted for the official opposition.

We'd now like to move on to our independent member. MPP McMahon, you now have the floor.

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: We'll continue on with Cheryl. What's the population of West Lincoln, by the way?

Ms. Cheryl Ganann: We currently sit around 16,000, just a little bit over.

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: And what is West Lincoln doing to address the housing crisis, specifically?

Ms. Cheryl Ganann: That's a very good question.

I also have provided you an outline, and in the back portion of that, the appendices show that we have a capability of close to 1,000 homes—I think it's actually, technically, 833—within our existing urban boundary. Prior to the changes made by the government—that's why I referred to 2018—we actually did an urban boundary expansion in conjunction with the region, taking in as little land as possible from farmlands. The very back page of the brief shows you our expanded urban area. Also, before that is a page that shows the block-plan approach that has been put in place for how that growth will take place in a very organized way. Some of our residents are very concerned that we not grow too quickly, so we have a very organized plan, going out to 2051, that should allow for that growth to happen. None of that has happened at this point in time. And I will reiterate that within the current existing boundary, we already still have, as many have alluded to, no movement on those existing opportunities for growth. The developers have approvals, and the houses are not there yet.

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: I'll move over to Mayor Jim Diodati. It's nice to meet you. I love your energy and your colourful analogies—I maybe disagree with a few things, but I love that.

Number one, as a former Toronto city councillor, I do want you to know that that was the wrong decision—it was a ridiculous decision, to cut council in half in the middle of an election. It did not save money. It doesn't work. And I question the real reason for doing that. So I'll just leave that with you.

Then, I'll ask you about how your municipality is tackling the housing crisis.

Mr. Jim Diodati: Thank you for the question. We've got a housing pledge for 8,000 houses, and we're doing our part to make sure that we get approvals expedited. We're revamping our departments. We've got a new process in our building department, where anybody with an application can see the progress and the status of your building application. You don't have to phone anybody. Our economic development office has access to that, because they're the advocate for development within the community.

We believe that the economic development horse is pulling the community services trailer, and we want to lead with development and more money coming into our communities. Our challenge is getting them to get shovels in the ground, and we know there are lots of reasons why that doesn't happen.

I know we're talking about Q2 of 2024, where things are turning around. We don't want to wait. I don't believe hope is a good strategy. We want to have an actual action plan from all levels—and that includes the federal government. They're not out of this picture. They need to be stepping up.

We've got applications in to them, as well, to build our—one of our challenges and holdbacks is, we need a waste water treatment plant built in Niagara. We have an application in, and we've been working on it for a few years. This is a \$400-million ask. Through ICIP funding, it will be a third, a third and a third—federal, provincial and municipal. When that gets built, it will open up more housing in Thorold and Niagara Falls; it will take pressure off the plants in St. Catharines and Welland so that we can expand. That is one of the holdbacks.

As well, as I say to you, we go to the building group—there are a lot of other things. There are so many studies they need to do. Just because it's approved doesn't mean they—that approves them to move to the next step. A lot of the time, there's archaeological—there are a lot of other studies that need to be done.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal): Thirty seconds remaining.

Mr. Jim Diodati: So we want to help them streamline and make it as simple as possible as quick as possible.

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: What kind of housing is it? Is it just single-family homes, or are you looking at a plethora of options for people?

Mr. Jim Diodati: That's a great question.

As the province approved as of right—three houses, with ancillary buildings, and with the federal government, along our arterial roads, we're going to go to four as of right—much more density, much more affordable and attainable throughout our city, because we understand it's not just single-family. Families change. The definition is very different.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal): Thank you, Mayor Diodati.

I'd now like to move to the government members. MPP Lorne Coe, you now have the floor.

Mr. Lorne Coe: Well, thank you, Chair, and through you, and for the clarity of those in the audience and those who might be watching, the GO Transit service and the hospital were accomplished by our government, just to clarify the record.

I wanted to allow the mayor from West Lincoln to continue the answer to the question by MPP Oosterhoff, and then I'll come back to the other mayors, because I do have questions.

Ms. Cheryl Ganann: Well, thank you for that opportunity. One of the things about small municipalities is that we are always looking for opportunities to share our services. Just the same as the situation with asking about the land, the fact that we have the escarpment in the middle between our communities is actually an impediment to shared fire services. The town of Grimsby did put a station on top; we do share that as a training facility. But the other side of West Lincoln, close to the Haldimand border, doesn't allow us to share fire services in its entirety. It will take a lot more work to figure out who will cover what areas. All of our departments, however, do have mutual-aid benefits so that we do have unofficial agreements in terms of fire services being shared. We do have an agreement in place in written form with the town of Pelham because, again, one of our coroners is a long way from the town of Smithville. We are in varying stages of that as well.

I do know, just recently, the 11 branches of libraries actually submitted to this committee—hopefully you all received it—something looking at shared library services more outwardly as well. There have been informal agreements all the way through in terms of sharing library services, and currently, there are various areas that share. We have difficulty just in our town with making sure that we can share between our three branches. You're looking at at least 18 to 25 kilometres between the three branches that we have currently in West Lincoln. That's not because we expanded to three, I will point out. It is also included in our report. But we didn't expand to three; we inherited three when the region was formed and when this entity called West Lincoln was formed. We've done a lot of work to maintain that service.

So it's not that we aren't; it's just that we are at a different stage. Are we intending to work further on that? Absolutely. We know that we need to look more carefully at all of those areas.

Mr. Lorne Coe: Thank you for that response—

Ms. Sheryl Ganann: I think we're the smallest and, therefore, we have the least potential at this point to lead that process but, certainly, we're involved.

Mr. Lorne Coe: Thank you for that.

Mayor from Fort Erie, I'm on page 4 of your submission and, in particular, the area that speaks to if there are responsibilities and services that can be combined, amended or moved from one level of local government to another, or combined among existing local governments, to support the construction of new homes and the provision of effective local governance more generally.

Now, your response within your delegation today talked about the reduction of planning responsibility, and you gave some examples out of the work that had been done by chief administrative officers. I need you to provide more detail about the effect. You cite application forms and procedures, but you'll know, and I know, having served for 13 years on Durham regional council, there's more beyond these words. So I'd like you to speak specifically about what you see to be the effect and what the changes would be to allow us to build—as we've discussed, and we're laser-focused on this—the 1.5 million homes. Can you just be a little bit more specific than what you have in your delegation?

Mr. Wayne Redekop: Yes, so a lot of the things that the CAOs have been working on relate to general governance sharing of services. I mentioned IT as an example, legal services, some planning services for the smaller municipalities and the region, but I focused on these in particular in my brief because those are the ones that really relate, in my view, directly to constructing new homes more quickly. There is a lengthy list, and I apologize for not having that available. I kind of anticipated this question might come up, but there is and I could certainly forward to you a listing of the shared services that have been discussed and that have been accomplished.

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To member Oosterhoff's comments: Waste management used to be delivered by the municipalities separately. It's been a regional responsibility for a number of years now; I think since 1995. We now have regional transit, so it's one system. Those all require triple-majority approval, and so they're agreed upon by all the municipalities. So, to cut it short, I can provide you with that information if you would like.

Mr. Lorne Coe: All right. I'd like to see that.

To the mayor of Niagara Falls, can you respond to that question that is guiding us, amongst three others, in our deliberations in the study—and some of the outcomes you see and could identify beyond the time that you had in your delegation today, please?

Mr. Jim Diodati: Well, I think the main objective of all of us—when I read the paper just this morning, they talked about the crises that we're dealing with: It's housing, it's affordability, it's opioid addiction, it's mental health—we're dealing with everything, and I think it all goes back to the most rudimentary and basic thing: Everyone needs a roof over their head. That's the first thing, and

then you need food in your belly. And then you can make good decisions.

I think we're making bad decisions. Our numbers, the article pointed out, are not getting better, they're getting worse. That's the definition of insanity: doing the same thing over and over and expecting a different outcome. If we don't do something different, nothing different is going to change. There's a quote that we've got to stop pulling people out of the river; we have to go upstream and find out what's happening.

We need to also do that with our builders and find out, "Why aren't you building the houses?" I've been doing that. I've been phoning the major builders asking them, "What's holding you back?" There's a lot of things. There isn't just one thing. But, within our control municipally, this is one of the issues. It is one of the concerns.

And if you look at the outcome, like the former chair said: older, sicker, poorer, less educated—we're going in the wrong direction. So I want to suggest it's a tough thing to do, but it's the right thing to do. I think we've got to be bold, and our legacy has to be that we made things better than they were when we got here. I think that's part of our responsibility.

Mr. Lorne Coe: You also mentioned, sir, the earlier delegation, about the importance—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal): Thirty seconds remaining.

Mr. Lorne Coe:—that all three levels of government have a role. Do you want to speak a little bit more specifically about the role of the federal government?

Mr. Jim Diodati: Absolutely. I've got calls in to our MPs with the same thing that we're saying: We need some attention and some money here, and the key is when we all row the boat together at the same time—when the feds, the province and the municipalities come together—we can do anything. But when we're going in different directions, rowing in different directions, you go in circles. I feel like we've been going in circles.

Mr. Lorne Coe: Thank you, all three, for your delegations.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal): Thank you, Mayors, for your presentation. I really appreciate you taking the time out today to be here to give your important feedback.

CORPORATION OF THE TOWN
OF NIAGARA-ON-THE-LAKE
CITY OF ST. CATHARINES
TOWN OF GRIMSBY

The Acting Chair (Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal): We'll now move to our next group of presenters. We'd like to call up the Corporation of the Town of Niagara-on-the-Lake, the city of St. Catharines and the town of Grimsby. May you please come up to the front and take your seat. Thank you.

I'd like to let our guests know that they'll have seven and a half minutes for their presentations. Please state your name for the record before you begin your presentation.

First off, I'd like to welcome the town of Niagara-on-the-Lake: Mayor Gary Zalepa.

Mr. Gary Zalepa: Thank you very much and good afternoon. Yes, my name is Gary Zalepa. I'm the Lord Mayor and I'm appearing before the committee on behalf of the town of Niagara-on-the-Lake. Council has supported a unanimous motion for me to be here. Several of my council members are here. I'm very pleased that they are. I have some informed perspective on Niagara governance. I have spent two-plus terms on local council, and I have a one-plus-a-couple-of-years term on regional council, so I'm going to try to provide some of that insight to you today.

On slide 1, I'm here for four requests: that we (1) acknowledge, respect and protect the distinctiveness of communities; (2) budget infrastructure funding for municipalities to achieve housing targets; (3) prioritize shared-services funding for local municipalities so we can efficiently deliver services; and (4) keep local decision-making at a local level.

Slide 3, if I could ask you to flip over, is a little overview of the town. We're located in northeast Niagara on the shores of Lake Ontario and the Niagara River. We have about 19,000 residents, expected to grow to 29,000 in the next 20 or so years, and we are on track to do that and meet our housing forecasts that are set by the province and the region. We have five distinct urban villages joined by a large agricultural community around us that is very different and distinctive from some of our municipal neighbours, St. Catharines and Niagara Falls. Niagara-on-the-Lake was the first capital of Upper Canada since 1792.

Slide 4: I'm going to talk a little bit about our governance structure, which has created this rich heritage, distinctive community attributes and a proven, effective government. We feel it must remain as an independent municipality so that we can maintain that important blend of cultural significance, economic vitality and community engagement, which is all just a testament to the success of local government.

Niagara-on-the-Lake has had a historically high voter turnout. The provincial average is roughly 33%. Our last election was over 48%. We have hit a high of 58% in the past, as well—a pretty engaged local electorate who keeps us pretty accountable. Local politicians in Niagara-on-the-Lake have other roles. We're not full-time politicians. This is a huge benefit in our community. We work; we live there; we volunteer there. We're part of the community in a way, running businesses etc. As a result, it's very accountable individuals that are on our council. We interact with residents every single day.

The total salary for our council is just about \$182,000. That's the total budget, which is well below Ontario's average salary for local politicians. We've had 100 years of good governance in the town of Niagara-on-the-Lake.

Flip to slide 5: I'll talk a little bit about the perfect balance that we've achieved through the past of heritage

and culture, distinct landscapes, green space and agriculture. These features are the core of what makes Niagara-on-the-Lake a very distinct community. It is also a significant economic driver for Ontario. We have a protected natural heritage conservation district. In fact, the first ever created in Ontario is in our heritage district. We also have several historic national park sites and Niagara Parks Commission sites, as well as the world-renowned Shaw Festival Theatre. We worked very hard to obtain the municipal assets that fit our community so specially.

In addition to our town buildings, like the historic courthouse on our main street, we also have some other assets that I list in the presentation, including one I'll mention: Niagara-on-the-Lake Hydro is owned 100% by the town of Niagara-on-the-Lake. It, in fact, has the best competitive hydro rates in Niagara. There are some other things, including our irrigation system, which is a partnership with local growers and the town, and it's contributed to the success of the agricultural work in the economy in Ontario. Many of these things make Niagara-on-the-Lake unique. In addition, a volunteer firefighting force: We have over 110 volunteer firefighters, very successful, very professional, very engaged in our community.

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Residents, business owners and tourists alike come to Niagara-on-the-Lake to experience the agricultural landscape, interact with the cultural heritage buildings and interplay with the local businesses, the Shaw, and be transported back in history while they visit.

Slide 6 just talks a little bit about the financial sustainability of the town. The town of Niagara-on-the-Lake is the third-highest contributor to regional services in Niagara. These services are important to us. They include police, EMS and public health. They are vital and they require an appropriate governance in measure to the contribution of the residents.

Niagara-on-the-Lake is aggressively closing the capital infrastructure gap that they have in our finances. Changes to governance could dilute the hard work that local government has done to invest in infrastructure. Local government has control of cost structures that best serve our local community. Local decisions should be made at the local level by local representatives.

Slide 7: The province provided funding streams in the past. The town has leveraged the Municipal Modernization Fund, and we thank the province for that. I ask the province to continue to look at that and prioritize shared service funding, so local area municipalities can continue to explore options to efficiently deliver services to our community.

On slide 8, I've listed some shared services. Niagara region has seen some tremendous success in exploring these opportunities, such as—I'll speak to planning services and support with the region and lower-tier municipalities. The town of Niagara-on-the-Lake has a detailed service agreement with the region of Niagara to ensure that the town can respond to the development applications that we're blessed to have. We are a growing municipality,

very well invested in and very attractive to investors from abroad.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal): Thirty seconds remaining.

Mr. Gary Zalepa: The most important thing that I would say about that is to continue looking at shared services, and I would point to slide 9. Two million people visit Niagara-on-the-Lake. This is a huge economic driver, and we ask for your continued support of looking at tourism and hospitality sectors and recognizing the important work between that and the tourist economy.

I would like to close by adding, again, my four points: acknowledge distinctive communities, budget infrastructure funding, prioritize shared services—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal): Thank you, Mayor Zalepa. That concludes the time allotted for today.

I'd now like to pass the mike over to the city of St. Catharines and Mayor Mat Siscoe. Please state your name for the record before you begin.

Mr. Mat Siscoe: Thank you and good afternoon. My name is Mat Siscoe. I am the mayor of St. Catharines, and I appreciate the opportunity as the mayor both of the largest local area municipality in Niagara and its only urban growth centre to discuss solutions to the systemic barriers that are impeding meaningful progress on helping us meet the province's housing goals, serve Niagara's residents and businesses, and provide solutions for those most in need in Niagara.

Over the past year, many cities in Ontario have been asked to sign housing pledges outlining how we will meet the targets set by the provincial government. In Niagara, St. Catharines, Niagara Falls and Welland have been asked and have enthusiastically agreed. In St. Catharines, I would note a unanimous council vote in favour of our pledge to build 11,000 homes, as well as the associated housing strategy.

But as we've embarked on this process, we have run into issues that make continued progress difficult. The multiple levels of bureaucracy are not suited to address the massive challenges we face in the post-pandemic era. In addressing the housing crisis, regional governance results in decisions and resourcing spread across a large area of 12 different towns and cities with dramatically different and conflicting goals and realities. This dilutes accountability for supporting housing and diminishes our ability as mayors and councils to focus all available resources to meeting our housing targets.

The best option to deal with these issues is a four-city model centred around the three urban centres of St. Catharines, Niagara Falls and Welland, with the more rural western municipalities making up the fourth city. Simply dissolving and downloading regional services on the 12 municipalities would be untenable for the smaller towns. Creating four larger cities would make this reform economically feasible and would also allow for major efficiencies to be created that would allow our communities to focus on the priority we share with the provincial government: getting more homes built faster.

Niagara has three distinct urban cores with suburban areas around them, separated by rural, with a large rural area to the west. The goal with the four-city model is to create a system that works better and is more efficient at allowing the residents and businesses to get on with the work they need to do.

As a result of Bill 23, cities are taking over responsibility for planning. Moving to a four-city model would allow the planning authority to be far more straightforward: 13 official plans would become four, 13 zoning bylaws reduced to four. This would make it easier for not just housing developers but business in general to invest in our region.

The truth, however, is cities need control over a number of areas in addition to planning authority for housing to get built. Cities need control first and foremost over the incentives we are all trying to develop in an effort to get appropriate housing built.

In St. Catharines, our community improvement plan specifically incentivizes the affordable housing units we know we need and the environmental cleanups we know are necessary to promote densification and infill development, an area of special concern in our city, where we have brownfield sites in need of remediation before they can be redeveloped. The city of St. Catharines has stewarded good development, we've avoided sprawl out into prime agricultural land, and these brownfield infill developments are necessary for our communities' future.

I have been frustrated that the current discussion at the regional level is about cutting those absolutely necessary incentives as a means of balancing the books. While I'm a firm proponent of taxpayer affordability, my council and I also made a commitment to the provincial government through our housing pledge, and this promise is not shared by my colleagues at the region. In the current climate, these decisions need to be at the local level, where the accountability to our housing pledges lie.

Cities also need control over the entirety of their road networks and the multi-modal connections within them—over their sidewalks, over their bike lane networks. We need to be able to ensure that new housing has adequate and appropriate connections to let new residents get to and from work and home. We need to be responsive to those residents and the businesses who support the housing, and our cities have a long track record of working with residents and businesses when they need that support.

Additionally, cities need control over dealing with the social issues that exist in our communities if we want them to be places where developers will build and people will want to live. I can't begin to express the frustration that I have dealt with over the last year as the homelessness crisis continues to grow and I try to navigate two levels of government to get issues dealt with.

While I applaud the hard work of regional staff—they do good work in spite of the structural barriers that exist—the reality is that we have a situation designed to confuse. Shelter spaces are a regional responsibility; clearing encampments falls to the city. This leads to delays and frustration on the part of residents and business owners.

If we're serious about getting new housing built, we need to ensure that where that housing goes is safe for all, and issues are dealt with quickly and effectively instead of being bogged down in bureaucracy.

I discussed this specific situation with staff in a single-tier city smaller than St. Catharines and they expressed surprise at how the homelessness issue could ever be dealt with effectively in a two-tier situation. In their municipality, community services and parks are under the same roof; they were able to seamlessly coordinate because of that. If we want housing built in the core of our city, where it is best suited, we need to be able to deal with the issues that exist.

There are areas where co-operation across Niagara is the best course of action, but this can be accomplished through a shared service board populated by members of each of the four councils. It doesn't require a whole additional layer of government. Things like police, public health, EMS and transit can and should be governed in this way. The new current transit commission would be a good model for a shared service system. Areas like waste management and economic development and tourism would also be areas where partnerships would be likely to exist. They already do in terms of tourism, demonstrated by the partnership recently undertaken between St. Catharines and Lincoln.

Niagara's lower-tier CAOs have been discussing shared services for several years and have many examples that have proven successful. The idea that changing the lines on the map would stop these partnerships or the need for shared services is wrong, and we have recent and long-standing history to prove it.

Some of our municipal boundaries are truly arbitrary lines at this stage. Beyond signage, nobody would ever know where some municipalities end and others begin. If someone with no knowledge of governance in Niagara were to look at a map without the boundary lines and saw where people lived and where economic activity was concentrated, a four-city model is what they would most logically conclude made sense. In fact, it's what they would likely assume already existed. Ultimately, that's the test of any governance model as I see it: what makes the most sense based on the circumstances that exist right now and will exist in the future.

The creation of the region of Niagara included many amalgamations. This new system would include several more. But given the geography of the region and how the cities and towns have developed next to and, in some cases, into each other—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal): Thirty seconds remaining.

Mr. Mat Siscoe: —a four-city model is the next iteration of what makes sense for the residents of the region, and not just the current residents, but future residents who want to live and work here. We owe those families, those seniors, the development community, the business owners—we owe them the level of accountability that would come from a single tier of government to deal with developing housing, maintaining our infrastructure, housing our

homeless and bringing new opportunities to our cities. This is what the provincial government has asked us to do. So we're asking the province to help us make that possible by fixing the structural issues that are standing in our way, with the four-city model.

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The Acting Chair (Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal): Thank you, Mayor Siscoe.

Now I would like to go to the town of Grimsby. Mayor Jeff Jordan, please state your name for the record.

Mr. Jeff Jordan: I'm Mayor Jeff Jordan. I want to thank the members of the Ontario Standing Committee on Heritage, Infrastructure and Cultural Policy for the opportunity to address you today.

The mayors from west Niagara, including myself from Grimsby along with mayors from Lincoln and West Lincoln, were going to speak with you together; however, it was recently brought to our attention that the committee was no longer going to facilitate a joint delegation. With that said, you may have heard similar things from the mayors of Lincoln and West Lincoln.

We understand the province is soliciting feedback on the ideal governance structure for Niagara. While we recognize there is a pressing need for a more integrated and co-operative approach to regional government, one that reflects the shared experiences and aspirations of our communities, we believe some clarity and direction on governance would be helpful to determine what this mandate means to us. We need more assistance and guidance from senior levels of government, including provincial support. We know that better service delivery and timely decisions will ensure the government is working efficiently on behalf of our taxpayers.

We have reviewed and discussed options for regional governance in Niagara, but we have not come to any conclusions on what the coming together of the towns in west Niagara specifically means.

To provide some background, our current practice and process looks at efficiencies, and we have been proactively coordinating with the other municipalities and the region on shared services. In fact, the continued pursuit of shared service opportunities to transform service delivery is something we have been pre-emptively doing for several years. We believe that this has helped advance the guiding principles of fiscal responsibility, innovation, sustainability, partnerships, transparency and accountability. The town has been pursuing shared services, both in terms of shared services amongst local area municipalities—for example, libraries and fire services—and shared services with the region, including transit and financial management software to make services seamless and cost-effective and processes more efficient for residents and businesses.

I'd also like to emphasize the current successful shared endeavours in west Niagara that underscore the potential of a closer relationship between our towns. Our unified efforts have played a pivotal role in supporting the establishment of a new hospital, a cornerstone of community well-being. Through collaborative planning, we have also

contributed to the realization of a new high school, fostering education and growth for the next generation in west Niagara. A few of us have also come together to deliver fire service, and planning and development. Further conversations around shared economic development and tourism are also under way. Additionally, our towns have actively participated in the creation of a shared fairground and advocated jointly for a new escarpment crossing.

Shared services is a crucial aspect that will shape the future of our community, and in west Niagara we have advocated how we deliver services to residents. In our pursuit of progress and efficiency, we recognize the importance of collaboration and resource optimization. Shared services are a testament to our commitment to delivering top-notch services while making the most of our resources. It's about working smarter, not harder, and ensuring that every taxpayer dollar is invested wisely.

By pooling our resources and sharing common services, we unlock a plethora of benefits for our municipalities—first and foremost, cost savings. By eliminating redundancy and streamlining processes, we can redirect funds towards projects that directly benefit our community, such as housing and infrastructure improvements. Shared services also pave the way for improved service delivery. By breaking down silos and fostering collaboration between different departments, we create a more interconnected and responsive municipality.

But shared services are not just about economics; they're about community. By joining forces, we strengthen the bonds that tie us together. Our municipality is a vibrant tapestry of diverse talents, and through shared services, we can tap into this wealth of expertise to create a more resilient and adaptable local government. Our experiences so far have validated the power of collaboration, and several projects have benefited our residents and enhanced the overall quality of life in our region.

Our individual municipalities continue to drive our own destiny, and as the team managing the day-to-day operations and as the subject matter experts, we have a vested interest in our residents and our communities.

Our more specific purpose today is to shed light on the pressing need for a more integrated and co-operative approach to regional governance, one that reflects the shared experiences and aspirations of our communities. Our comments centre on fostering a stronger relationship amongst our towns.

We recognize that there is more work to be done. The current Niagara and regional governance structure presents some challenges in efficiently delivering services and addressing the growing need for housing in our communities. We believe that by forming a more integrated service delivery model, we can further streamline the decision-making processes, optimize resource allocation and better serve the diverse needs of our residents. This can take on multiple forms, ranging from administrative only to more integration in terms of how councils are structured.

As we move forward, we seek your direction on what sort of model ideally makes sense. As one of the fastest-

growing communities in the Niagara region, we seek clarity on what will be provided regionally versus locally. We know both offer important aspects of service delivery. It is also critical that any change should come with funding support to ensure that there is no decrease to service levels to our residents.

Our municipality is on the cusp of a transformative chapter, and with your direction, we will build a legacy of excellence that future generations will be proud of. Once again, we need more assistance and guidance from our senior levels of government, including provincial support. It is our hope—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal): Thirty seconds remaining.

Mr. Jeff Jordan:—that you let us continue with shared services until we are able to facilitate proper public consultation.

Once the province is able to provide clarity and direction on governance, we would like to put the question on the ballot during our next municipal and school board election in the fall of 2026 to solicit feedback from our residents.

Residents are the backbone of a community. They shape its identity, support its growth and make it a place that people are proud to call home. Residents benefit from a thriving community, and a thriving community benefits from its residents.

We look forward to working together to formalize a vision for the advancement of west Niagara and Niagara region.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal): Thank you, Mayor Jordan. That concludes the time allocated for the presentations today.

We'll start with the members of the official opposition. MPP Stevens, you may begin.

Mrs. Jennifer (Jennie) Stevens: Thank you to all the delegates that came this afternoon, and this morning as well; I didn't get a chance to thank them.

We have heard throughout the day different models of governance. I think it's fair to say that, often, when we get different levels of government together and a bunch of politicians sitting in the room—and I see a lot of previous politicians as well—we often get different views on how we should direct our governance in the Niagara region.

This is, I think, the fifth time, if I'm correct to say, that this governance model has been looked at by different tables. There have been different faces around it. Is it fair to say that we definitely need a view at the governance level in Niagara? Probably. We need a full, robust consultation with the public, with the higher levels of government, with the municipalities. Coming here today, I thought the mandate was to discuss and have the conversation: "examine whether two-tier governments in" six "regions support or hinder the construction" of homes.

When I came here this morning, I drove downtown St. Catharines, and we're a hundred deep in our food banks. Our affordability is beyond even comprehension. Why? People can't afford to live in Niagara. And I say, when we get different politicians in a room, they tend to

steer the conversation and the message, meaning it favours their idea and their own agenda.

I'm here. I want to thank these delegates today. Mayor Siscoe, I'm going to be asking you my first round of questions. I do thank you for coming, but I really want to put it on the table that the elephant in the room here should be affordability, housing and making sure that people have roofs over their heads. We are here on January 10, and we're discussing governance when we should be really talking about what the public wants to hear us talk about at a provincial level.

But in saying that, we'll go to the mandate here. I want to know, Mayor Siscoe, as we contemplate the prospect of Niagara possibly moving towards a different governance model that you discussed, if such a transformation occurs, do you envision yourself playing a pivotal role in the governance of this new possible expanded municipal structure?

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Mr. Mat Siscoe: I appreciate the question.

With all due respect, I did want to say, you mentioned the mandate is housing; I believe, in reading the letter from Minister Calandra, the mandate is housing as well as whether two-tier government is hindering provision of effective local governance. I think that's important to recognize—and I've outlined a few ways.

When it comes to the provision of the new governance structure, like all politicians, I serve at the pleasure of my community. If they see fit to continue to have me in the role that I'm in, then I would happily serve within a new governance structure, and if they don't see fit to do that, then they will make that decision.

I'm fairly confident that with a four-city model and where the city of St. Catharines falls within that, we'll continue to have the success that we are having with respect to building new homes and getting more housing units approved. I would like to think that when the time comes, when I'm running on my record, it will be a positive one and my residents will appreciate the work that I've put in.

Mrs. Jennifer (Jennie) Stevens: Fair enough. Housing barriers and challenges and meeting targets that the provincial government has put forward to municipalities—the challenge is to build homes. I've heard throughout the day that red tape is one of the reasons why we're not getting houses built, and of course, we've also heard that there are different areas.

I'm just wondering: The challenges in housing development often extend beyond municipal governance and encompass issues like interest rates, labour shortages. There are so many other barriers that we have faced, and I'm sure St. Catharines has, in meeting their target. How do you propose that the province can take steps to help address the external barriers to ensure the timely construction of housing within municipalities? And what measures might directly support the city of St. Catharines in building more houses and reaching that provincial target that has been put in place for the city of St. Catharines?

Mr. Mat Siscoe: I appreciate the question. I think Minister Calandra and the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing have been good partners up to this point. They've been receptive to the feedback we've given them.

The comment has been made and I've heard a number of people say that the city of St. Catharines, like all other cities—we don't swing the hammers; we provide the permits. But there are attendant works around the housing file that need to be done, as well. I've heard a number of delegates speak to the infrastructure challenges that exist. We've had good conversations with the Ministry of Infrastructure as well as Infrastructure Ontario on ways that we can facilitate that infrastructure work being done. We know that there are a lot of pieces that need to be put in place.

St. Catharines is an aged community, like many municipalities in Niagara. The city is almost 150 years old. I hate to say this, but some of the infrastructure and the pipes downtown might be as old or older than the city itself. We pull clay out of the ground every once in a while, which is a bit of a surprise. But we are making headway on that infrastructure. If there was additional support coming from the provincial and the federal levels of government with respect to dollars, that would always be appreciated.

The bottom line is, we know that there are specific areas where we need help, and we know that those conversations continue to be ongoing with both the provincial and the federal levels of government. And I will take this opportunity to thank our local MPPs, because I know all four of you have been facilitating those conversations, the same way that our federal MPs have.

The Acting Chair (Ms. Natalia Kusendova-Bashta): One minute.

Mrs. Jennifer (Jennie) Stevens: I guess I'll finish it up, then. Thank you, delegates, again for coming.

I want to go to the Lord Mayor for Niagara-on-the-Lake. I just want to say, because I am the critic for tourism and sports—I want to thank Niagara-on-the-Lake for being that economic booster and such a robust town, to make sure that we bring in that economic drive into the city of St. Catharines as well as Niagara-on-the-Lake and through Niagara. Do you want to highlight that?

The Acting Chair (Ms. Natalia Kusendova-Bashta): Thirteen seconds.

Mr. Gary Zalepa: I would say that hasn't happened by mistake. It has been several hundred years of good stewardship and good local representation that has gotten us there, and we're looking to do more of that, but we're not going to do that if we disappear into a bigger city.

Mrs. Jennifer (Jennie) Stevens: Thank you.

The Acting Chair (Ms. Natalia Kusendova-Bashta): Thank you very much.

We will now turn it over to our independent member.

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: Thank you very much. I have a fraction of the time so we'll be quick, but we'll start off—thank you for your presentations. They're enlightening, for sure, especially for someone not from the area. I'm from Toronto via Collingwood.

I'll start with Gary from Niagara-on-the-Lake. What's the population of Niagara-on-the-Lake?

Mr. Gary Zalepa: It's 19,000, just headed towards 20,000.

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: Okay. I just want to echo what my colleague said, that everyone knows Niagara-on-the-Lake in Ontario. It's a cultural, natural, unique gem and a huge tourist draw, but just a beautiful place to visit—

Mr. Gary Zalepa: Our residents feel that way too.

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: Yes, maybe I should think about moving there.

Thank you for your presentation. We're hearing a lot of the same things that you're mentioning today with your request: local decisions, keeping it at the local level, respect for distinct communities and a little bit of the shared service, the infrastructure funding. What would be the best-case scenario for you, for Niagara-on-the-Lake, for infrastructure funding?

Mr. Gary Zalepa: Thank you for the question. I would say that we recognize that infrastructure has been inadequately funded for over 30 years by both the federal and provincial governments. At one time, a higher-level government funded over 60% of infrastructure in municipalities. Today, that number is less than 8%. I may be exactly off a little bit on the percentage, but I'm fairly comfortable that that gap exists.

For me, that would be the huge win, that this nation and the province come up with a new federal fiscal framework to fund municipalities' growth, and infrastructure is the key driver. We're doing a good job in Niagara-on-the-Lake closing that gap, but it's a challenge, and with property taxes being our only revenue source, it's sometimes insurmountable. I know at the region, that gap is significant, and that is a gap that needs serious participation by other levels of government.

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: Right. And that's part and parcel with the lofty housing goals. We all agree: We're in a horrible housing crisis and we need to have shovels in the ground yesterday.

To that effect, how's it going with Niagara-on-the-Lake addressing the housing crisis?

Mr. Gary Zalepa: I would say our housing needs are a little different than some of our neighbours', but we're meeting our targets that are set by the provincial policy statements and the official plan of both the region as well as our own. We have several thousand units that are approved already. We have a massive opportunity in our Glendale area, which is by the Queen Elizabeth Way interchange, and we're working in partnership with the regional government to develop the district plan rules around growth there.

So I'd say, very good; we're very successful in our efforts. We're introducing more mixed type of property style, which should assist more people entering the housing market in Niagara-on-the-Lake.

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: Fabulous.

When you mentioned your shared services that you're already working with other municipalities on, one of

them—of course, being an environmentalist—caught my eye. It was alignment on climate action. Can you tell me about anything there that you would like to brag about?

Mr. Gary Zalepa: Yes, I think that's a good example of how Niagara municipalities share together. You've heard today that our CAO groups meet on a regular basis. They share ideas.

Some of the ideas that came forward were how we look at managing our fleet and our equipment in our fleet, not only vehicles but also the equipment we use to take care of parks and other assets that we have. We've been able to learn, through that CAO group, and bring that information back for a complete fleet modernization in the town, which is going to assist us with the cost structure and also the emissions that are going to be from the equipment and the vehicles over the next few years. Council is pretty excited about its plan to put that in place.

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: Awesome, and do—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal): Thank you, Ms. McMahon.

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: Aw.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal): We have 10 seconds left if you would like to wrap it up.

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: Well, I'll ask you about your green standard later on.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal): Thank you very much.

I'd now like to move to the government side. MPP Kusendova-Bashta.

Ms. Natalia Kusendova-Bashta: I will start with Mayor Zalepa. For me, as a Polish Canadian, Niagara-on-the-Lake is a place of great historical importance. As a young Polish Girl Guide, I would go there for the annual Sunday pilgrimage. For those of you who may not know, actually, in 1917, close to 22,000 Polish soldiers trained at Camp Kosciuszko in Niagara-on-the-Lake, and in fact, there is a military cemetery of the Haller's Blue Army. We have pilgrimages there every year, and we have officials from Poland coming to visit every single year. So I know that place very well. Niagara-on-the-Lake is a beautiful, picturesque town I highly recommend for tourism. I went there after I got married for a mini honeymoon, so it's a very beautiful—a lot of heritage sites and heritage hotels.

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But Mayor Zalepa, I wanted to ask you, in terms of some of the shared services that you proposed here on slide 8—I'm a registered nurse by profession, so I'm always very interested in health care. Here, you mentioned some of the shared services that could be amalgamated among some of the local municipalities to "support physician recruitment" as well as "identify and increase health care infrastructure."

I was wondering if you would like to expand on that a little bit.

Mr. Gary Zalepa: Thank you very much for your question. I'm happy to do so. In fact, that's an area we've already been exploring with some of our partners, including the other local municipalities and the region of Niagara. The region of Niagara has actually implemented

recruitment resources in the form of staff and support for recruiting physicians, and we've worked with them on behalf of the town of Niagara-on-the-Lake, our council, in looking at filling the void. We were short a nurse practitioner as well as some doctors in the community, so we leveraged that relationship and the opportunity the region created through its joint physician recruitment office, and then also with some of our partnering municipalities, including Fort Erie. I know we talked to St. Catharines as well.

I think that's an example of some of the work that we're doing to work together, still respecting the needs in different communities, but leveraging resources together.

Ms. Natalia Kusendova-Bashta: Thank you very much.

And now to Mayor Siscoe. I checked your housing stats for 2023 and it was 73%—I believe that those were the November 2023 numbers. You're 23% on the way to achieving those housing starts. So, by December, have you achieved them?

Mr. Mat Siscoe: We believe we were close. We don't have the final numbers in now. I know that, looking at this upcoming year, we've received our targets from the ministry and we have expectation to have the permits issued to exceed our targets for 2024. If we did miss the 23%, I think the 2024 permits will allow us to catch up. So we are on track.

We knew we had a lot of changes we needed to make when I came into office in 2022. We've had project expeditors positioned for a number of years, but there were other things we needed to do. We took advantage of the streamlined development fund that was offered by the province and we've made a number of changes to try and modernize our systems and our processes to make sure that it's easier. We've gotten good reviews from the local building community. They appreciate the work that's gone into it. We hold regular liaison meetings with builders to make sure that we know what their needs are and what we can do to fix those issues that may have existed at city hall in the past.

Ms. Natalia Kusendova-Bashta: And, Mayor, you spoke about homelessness and the challenges surrounding that and how, with the different levels of government, sometimes there are challenges working together to address some of those challenges. I did want to state for the record that the region of Niagara received an 86% increase in the homelessness prevention funding: so from \$11 million all the way to \$20 million.

I was just wondering, based on your experience, have you seen those dollars make a meaningful impact in your community?

Mr. Mat Siscoe: Well, first of all, I thank the government for the increase. I've tried to be very loud and proud of the fact that we were able to achieve that increase. I will also say the vast majority of the dollars, at least initially, are being spent in St. Catharines, and this is where I try to be very clear. I have a lot of respect for my regional colleagues, the staff at the region. They understand that the problems that exist are concentrated in St. Catharines. We

have accessed the vast majority of those dollars and will continue to over the years.

The issue that exists is one of timeliness, first of all, and of willingness to deal with the problem. I've had to spend a lot of time educating my colleagues at regional council—and this is no disrespect to them; they have their own communities that they have to worry about. But I've had to educate them about what issues have actually existed in the downtown of St. Catharines. I don't like to talk about those things loudly and publicly, but I need people to understand that, like all other municipalities of our size and larger across Ontario and across North America, there are serious problems, and that disconnect between the two levels of government makes it very difficult.

I have a homelessness outreach coordinator position that we fund. That's something, for the record, a city should not be funding in a two-tier government. We should not have that position. But I have one, and I can't get him access to the database. He's the one taking down encampments. He can't see the database for the homeless shelters to figure out where to bring people, because it's a regionally run database and they won't provide access. That's the disjointed issue that we run into.

I've been here for 14 years as a municipal councillor. We talk a lot about, "We need better communication. We need this." Okay, but 14 years on—and I know it's extended well before that—we're still having that conversation about needing better communication. At a certain point, it's a function of two levels of government and two bureaucracies that can't interface the way they need to and the way they don't have to in single-tier municipalities.

Ms. Natalia Kusendova-Bashta: Thank you.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal): MPP Oosterhoff.

Mr. Sam Oosterhoff: How much time, Chair?

The Acting Chair (Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal): About a minute and 20 seconds.

Mr. Sam Oosterhoff: Okay. I'll start with my first question then, and I might have to continue some of them on the next round, because I do have a substantial number.

Thank you, first of all, for speaking this afternoon. I look forward to the conversation. My first question is going to go to Mayor Jordan. I appreciated your remarks, and they were reminiscent of what we heard from some other local municipalities. I'm just wondering, just to clarify, to get it more precise: If you absolutely had to pick, would you stick with this current system, 13 municipalities, would you go to a four-municipal single-tier model with service boards for shared services, or would you go to a single-tier municipality in Niagara?

Mr. Jeff Jordan: I certainly wouldn't go to a single city. Grimsby is very close to Hamilton. We still see the outskirts of new Hamilton; people are not happy with that, still, to today. Everything sucked to the middle in Hamilton. Niagara is completely different—

Mr. Sam Oosterhoff: Right. So you wouldn't go with that.

Mr. Jeff Jordan: Definitely not.

Mr. Sam Oosterhoff: Okay. So the other two?

The Acting Chair (Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal): You have 10 seconds remaining.

Mr. Jeff Jordan: Depending on economics and the ability of our citizens to work together, I would lean to the four-city model if it makes economic sense.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal): Thank you, Mayor. That concludes the government side's allocated time.

I'd like to move to the official opposition. MPP Wayne Gates.

Mr. Wayne Gates: Thanks to the presenters. As you know, I've represented Niagara-on-the-Lake for the last four terms, and it is by far one of the prettiest communities in all of Canada and Ontario—even to the point they still call you the Lord Mayor. I think you're the only Lord Mayor in the entire country. And we have the Shaw Festival. We have volunteer firefighters. As we're cutting newspapers, we actually have two in Niagara-on-the-Lake, because the community is so engaged. People want to hear about what's going on in Niagara-on-the-Lake. They participate. Just for New Year's, we went to two levees together: one at the Legion and talked about how valuable the Legion is, and then we went to the Navy League.

So maybe what you could do is educate some of the people that want to make a different—the way it is now, kind of get away from it. Maybe just talk a little about how important Niagara-on-the-Lake is to Canadian history and why it is so important to preserve it, support it, and get us a nurse practitioner—a little off the subject, but that's another issue that we need to get.

Mr. Gary Zalepa: Wow. I'm by no means a history major, but I appreciate that.

Niagara-on-the-Lake really was founded in the wilderness—Upper Canada. Newark, Niagara, was given the title of first capital of Upper Canada, hence the title Lord Mayor was given by the British government. That title was asked for again in the 1970s by town council, and the British government agreed to do that again. So it's quite unique, and our residents are very proud of that as well.

The town of Niagara-on-the-Lake was a refuge for folks who were escaping the tyranny and the rebellion in the United States, so the community grew around that, and it formed a nucleus for government and business for Upper Canada early on, just after the late 1700s when Lieutenant Governor Simcoe and his wife landed there at Navy Hall, which is where we had the levee that MPP Gates is talking about.

So there's lots of history rooted there. We have national historic sites. We have several of them, including Fort George and Fort Mississauga. We've got Fort Niagara just across the river and, for many that might not know, Fort Niagara—which is actually today in the United States—was still part of Upper Canada during the time of the American Revolution. It was still part of the British crown. So there's lots of interplay amongst the residents across from Youngstown and Niagara-on-the-Lake and Queenston and Lewiston. There's lots of interconnectivity with families. And then the seat of government formed around

all of that in Niagara-on-the-Lake. We have the courthouse, which was the seat where the proclamation was made to abolish slavery in the British crown, so that's a pretty significant piece of history as well.

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And so these are all things that attract people to want to be visiting the town, enjoying the town, not to mention the beautiful scenery. We're just blessed by geography—the beautiful lake bed and the river. I could go on and on, MPP Gates.

Mr. Wayne Gates: And you should.

Mr. Gary Zalepa: It's just a unique community. I think that it would be a real shame for the government of the day to erase the municipality of Niagara-on-the-Lake from the record books. My residents, I know, would be pretty upset with it as well.

We're doing a good job of taking care of our governance in our own area. Our neighbours around us—we don't have great commonality on issues. We have a large agricultural area separating us. There are some things that we see that we could do together, and we are trying to do those things together, but there are some other things that we really don't.

Mr. Wayne Gates: Yes, I agree. You can talk about Niagara-on-the-Lake, and you should talk about it, because I spend a lot of time down there at a lot of events with yourself. We have unbelievable wineries that people come from all over the province of Ontario to see. The Navy League—we shot off the cannon just because of that history. We were actually shooting the cannon at the Americans, but it wasn't a real cannon—

Mr. Gary Zalepa: It makes them a little nervous.

Mr. Wayne Gates: But we were shooting it that way to talk about the history there. The War of 1812 and all those things are so important to make sure we protect—

Mr. Gary Zalepa: Not to mention the driving—

Mr. Wayne Gates: Oh, I'm sorry. Go ahead.

Mr. Gary Zalepa: Not to mention the driving force of the agricultural sector; 50% of Ontario's tender fruit is produced in Niagara-on-the-Lake.

Mr. Wayne Gates: Yes, it is, and we should be proud of it, protect it and do everything we can. We just got rid of a tax that was unfair to our wineries down there.

My colleagues still want to ask some questions. I just want to say to the other mayors who have spoken that when we talk about red tape—I don't know how we continue to talk about red tape. We need to build housing. We need to get our kids and our grandkids out of our basements. I agree with that. Our party agrees we need to build—I think it's 1.5 million homes. We can do that without doing it on the greenbelt, and we proved that.

But it makes me kind of think: We have 39,200 houses that have been approved through all the planning processes, whether that's in St. Catharines, Niagara Falls, your municipality of Niagara-on-the-Lake or Fort Erie, who I represent as well. We have a 10-to-11-year supply. What we need to do is find out what we can do to get the builders to put the shovels in the ground.

Now, I know they have some challenges around interest rates, but this is where the government can step in. They did it with the Niagara parks, where they lowered some of the interest rates so they can invest in their tourist sector. They did it—very, very successful. There are some things that we can do. But red tape isn't the problem right now on building homes; the problem is we've got to support our builders, who have done an incredible job over the last number of years, building incredible homes. The safety records are incredible. But the government has to come to the table.

And on your homeless issue, I've been saying it and I'm going to continue to say it: One way to fix our homeless issue, quite frankly, is let's double the rates of OW and ODSP. Nobody in one of the richest provinces and countries in the world should be living in poverty, should be living on our streets, and those with mental health should be getting the help they need, with putting investment into our health care, into our mental health facilities.

I'll turn it over to my colleagues here, because I think they want to talk to the mayor of—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal): Fifty seconds remaining.

Interjections.

Mr. Jeff Burch: Thanks, Wayne. I'm used to that, by the way.

I just wanted to bring up—and I know there's probably not enough time for an answer, Mayor Siscoe, so this may be a bit unfair for me to ask you this. But the government did the right thing, I think, in reversing the Peel dissolution of the region, because it was going sideways. It was going sideways because people didn't understand how much it costs to dissolve something like a regional government. They were losing 250 employees a week. There was going to be a huge property tax increase.

In this climate of a housing affordability crisis, a basic affordability crisis, is it really a good idea to go down that road for the sake of just—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal): Thank you, MPP Burch. That concludes the time allotted to the official opposition.

I'd now like to move on to our independent member. MPP McMahon, you may now proceed.

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: I guess you're just going to have to mull that over, that thought.

On to Mat, mayor of St. Catharines: What's the population of St. Catharines?

Mr. Mat Siscoe: Right now, it's about 141,000.

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: You mentioned your housing starts and that you're probably going to meet those targets in 2024. What types of housing are you building in St. Catharines?

Mr. Mat Siscoe: All different varieties. We are constrained by our urban boundaries, so the vast majority of our developments are infill developments; there's very little greenfield left. So we are seeing townhomes; we're seeing condo developments; we are seeing some single-family homes, but not a lot because we simply don't have

the space for it; some missing middle. We've introduced accessory dwelling unit incentives—

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: Like garden suites?

Mr. Mat Siscoe: Yes, we've introduced incentives as a part of our CIP for those as well. So we're hoping to see more development in that. We recognize that that missing middle is where we have to be focusing a lot of our efforts, so that's where we're focusing.

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: What about rental, co-ops, things like that?

Mr. Mat Siscoe: I've been pushing purpose-built rental very heavily. We are starting to see more developers coming in with proposals for purpose-built rental. Of specific note, the old hospital site on Queenston Street is still slated to be at least 1,200 purpose-built rental units, and we recognize that as a driving need. Our vacancy rate is essentially zero at this point, and we need more rentals, so that's definitely top of mind and concern.

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: That's good to hear.

I don't know if St. Catharines has a green standard. Toronto has a green standard in planning. You have to achieve a tier—

Mr. Mat Siscoe: We are working towards that. We have a climate action plan for the community, though, that outlines how the corporation is dealing with things and is the lens with which we view all of our policies through. So as new policies come forward, they all are subject to that.

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: I heard you mention bike lanes, so my ears pricked up.

Mr. Mat Siscoe: I'm a huge believer in bike lanes.

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: Could we get that on record, a little louder? That's fantastic. I better move to St. Catharines now.

You mentioned the shared services board idea. Can you elaborate a bit more on that? Are you patenting that as your famous idea?

Mr. Mat Siscoe: Well, I don't know if I can patent it. I'm sure others have had the same idea.

We recognize that there are some areas—I don't think there's any validity to the idea, if we were to go to a four-city model, where we need four public health units. I don't think that makes any sense. For EMS services, that doesn't make any sense. It's not economically viable, and it's not necessary.

I mentioned the transit system. Our governance model and the transit system—while it's not perfect, it provides representation for the municipalities that are involved.

I think if we go to a four-city model, the four cities I've outlined would have a fairly similar population basis. So the representation by population situation kind of takes care of itself, which—I will also be clear—right now, with regional government, it does not. The city of St. Catharines is under-represented through regional government, based on our population. It's a long-standing concern, but it's almost impossible to fix when you have a regional government of 30 politicians.

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: Thanks for that.

On to Jeff from Grimsby: I just have a minute left. I love the idea of you putting the question on the ballot. You're the first person today to say that.

How is Grimsby addressing the housing crisis?

Mr. Jeff Jordan: We're sitting on 3,500 units approved by the town. We also have the potential with developers in line for 7,000 more units, well above our targets.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal): You have 30 seconds remaining.

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: And the same question I just asked your seatmate: What types of homes?

Mr. Jeff Jordan: Certainly, everything. Mainly, less single-family homes than—

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: That's what I want to hear.

Mr. Jeff Jordan: Historically, Grimsby built far too many single-family homes, and we're trying to catch up now with multi-housing. We just approved our first rental unit—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal): Thank you very much, Mayor. That concludes the time allotted to our independent member.

We'd now like to move to our government members. MPP Sam Oosterhoff.

Mr. Sam Oosterhoff: I really appreciate your time today. I'm going to start with the Lord Mayor from Niagara-on-the-Lake.

Lord Mayor, I think this morning we spoke—if you remember, we had an opportunity to speak about this as well. There are 126 municipal politicians in Niagara. There are 124 provincial politicians in the province of Ontario. We have about half a million people who live in Niagara. We have 15.5 million people who live in the province of Ontario.

Do you genuinely believe that it is appropriate to have more politicians in Niagara than in the entire province of Ontario for provincial politics?

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Mr. Gary Zalepa: Yeah, I don't—

Mr. Sam Oosterhoff: Yes? Was that a yes?

Mr. Gary Zalepa: No. I don't like your question. In fact, I think your question needs to have a bit more credence to it.

Mr. Sam Oosterhoff: I appreciate that you don't like it, but that is the question. Do you think that's appropriate?

Mr. Gary Zalepa: Well, no, because there are 12 municipalities. Let's talk about them independently. Do I think there are too many elected politicians for the town of Niagara-on-the-Lake? Absolutely not.

Mr. Sam Oosterhoff: You don't?

Mr. Gary Zalepa: No.

Mr. Sam Oosterhoff: Okay, so as a specific area, you don't think Niagara-on-the-Lake—but the rest of the region?

Mr. Gary Zalepa: I think that's up to the rest of the municipalities to do what they want to do with their governance. It's not for me to tell them what to do.

Mr. Sam Oosterhoff: Okay, thank you.

Mayor Siscoe, a question: I understand that St. Catharines was once a number of different municipalities, and

that was combined in the amalgamation in 1970, is that correct?

Mr. Mat Siscoe: It was 1960 when St. Catharines was amalgamated. Your colleague across the way will tell about Black Monday, when Merritton became a part of St. Catharines—

Mrs. Jennifer (Jennie) Stevens: Wednesday.

Mr. Mat Siscoe: Sorry, Black Wednesday. I get reminded of it whenever I'm down at the Merritton Legion.

But I will say, the unique characteristics of those individual townships—Merritton, Port Dalhousie—has been maintained. This is one of my frustrations when we have this discussion, the concern that, "Well, the characteristics are so unique." For sure, and if they are, they will continue. The amalgamation of St. Catharines happened in 1960 and folks in Merritton still refer to Black Wednesday. Port Dalhousie still reminds me how important that township was. Those characteristics continue.

Not to speak too much about my neighbours, but I would point out that Niagara-on-the-Lake at one time was multiple different municipalities as well that have come together to form the modern day—

Mr. Gary Zalepa: Put your name on the ballot in Niagara-on-the-Lake and see how that goes.

Mr. Sam Oosterhoff: I absolutely thank you, Your Worship, from St. Catharines.

For myself growing up in Lincoln as well: Lincoln was Beamsville, Clinton and Louth townships. Obviously now Lincoln is what it is. I think if you had asked people in 1970 about that, there might not have always been the support that there was, but understanding that the Lord Mayor is supportive of the status quo currently, if I correctly understand it—okay, I'll ask you then: Do you support the status quo or changes, and if changes, what kind of changes would you make?

Mr. Gary Zalepa: You're asking me if I support the status quo in regional government?

Mr. Sam Oosterhoff: Regional government and local municipalities—

Mr. Gary Zalepa: I think there's opportunities for making things better all the time.

Mr. Sam Oosterhoff: Like what?

Mr. Gary Zalepa: We looked at enhanced services. We're continuing to do that. We have a long list of services that we're going to be looking at and continuing to share.

I think you can always look at the number of elected people that you have at a regional level. I'm not opposed to that. But I'm not going to sit here and tell other municipalities the number of people they should have elected on their ballots. My residents are comfortable with the people we have. Our people are part-time, they have real jobs, they have businesses they run in our community—it works really well. We're engaged really strongly with our electorate in Niagara-on-the-Lake. It shows by the voter turnout.

Mr. Sam Oosterhoff: I'm going to ask you a question on that, because you're saying it works really well. I just read an article last night about a road in your town, that your town passed a motion in 2014 asking for the name of

a road to be changed. The region changed it, I believe, a couple of days ago, finally—10 years to change the name of a road.

Mr. Gary Zalepa: I'm sure this wasn't a burning issue, Sam—

Mr. Sam Oosterhoff: Excuse me. Niagara Region Transit came into place last year, January 2023, right? That's great. That started in 2003; that's when the conversation started for those services.

I understand that governments like to move slow, but when you require, in some cases, triple majorities in order to move on something like transit and the types of services that I think we can all understand are important, do you think there are too many cooks in the kitchen? From your perspective, it's just great; I mean, the way things are going, we should keep it the way it is in terms of 126 people making decisions?

Mr. Gary Zalepa: I think that you have to be careful making these comparisons across the province when you're looking at full-time people versus part-time people elected in Niagara and what people in Niagara region want.

I will say, your one question about transit, I think it's respectful of the taxpayers that you have a triple majority. Residents in Niagara-on-the-Lake pay \$3 to every \$1 for services that go into the Niagara region. They're happy to do so when they see value in it. We see value in transit. We've invested in transit. We're supportive of transit. We're getting more transit services than we have in the past through shared services and regional government. That's not something we could do on our own. If it was a four-city or some other type of model, I would be very stressed at being able to get that service to my municipality.

Examples of poor governance with amalgamated municipalities: hospital systems and school boards have wreaked havoc on my residents. They pull schools out of my municipality. They pulled a hospital out of my municipality. I have no say. We don't have elected people on their boards. It's a disaster. My residents are not happy about that kind of stuff.

So that's what you're talking about here: changing government, moving it, making it further away and reducing the number of elected people. I say that would be shameful. It's happened with school boards, and it's happened with hospital systems, and my residents do not want to see that anymore. In fact, we'd like to see where we can pull back and have some more of that responsibility ourselves and put in the services like a nurse practitioner that we need in our municipality.

Mr. Sam Oosterhoff: Right, thank you—just because we're running close on time. I appreciate that passion and sharing your position on that. Thank you.

Mayor Jordan, I just want to ask a couple more questions with regard to shared services. I understand you've done some work with the town of Lincoln, specifically around fire. We had Lincoln and West Lincoln in earlier. We were speaking about fire and also some of the library services, different shared services; I know there's back

office. I know it's just one example so it's kind of anecdotal, but I asked Mayor Easton this morning, "Why are you the only municipality working with the town of Pelham—that shared library, for example?" I'm just going to ask you the same question: Why are we seeing other municipalities not move towards some of the models that are coming out of west Niagara in terms of shared fire and some of these other pieces?

Mr. Jeff Jordan: Well, I certainly won't speak for the other municipalities. I don't think that's my place to tell you why I don't think they're moving forward.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal): Thirty seconds remaining.

Mr. Jeff Jordan: Certainly, I know we are always looking for shared services. We shared a head planner, given the difficulty of finding senior staff, and we're always looking for services being amalgamated at a cost savings, but doing it for the sake of doing it doesn't make a lot of sense. And I do think that in Niagara, if you're doing anything about politicians, you have to look at value for a mouth that is going to communicate to the upper government and communicate with the constituents—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal): Thank you very much, Mayor.

That concludes the time allotted for this conversation today. I want to thank all three of you for making yourselves available to be a part of this conversation. Thank you so much for coming and thank you for all of your insightful information.

NIAGARA BUSINESS AND
INNOVATION FUND
GREATER NIAGARA CHAMBER
OF COMMERCE
MS. MICHELLE SEABORN

The Acting Chair (Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal): Now, I'd like to call up the Niagara Business and Innovation Fund, the Greater Niagara Chamber of Commerce and Michelle Seaborn. Please come to the front and please be seated.

Ladies and gentlemen, sorry to cut the party short, but we are running a little bit behind on time, so if anybody would like to continue their conversations, please do so outside in the lobby. We will be starting with our next set of guests in a matter of minutes. So our MPPs, if they would like to come back and take their seats, we will begin our next set of conversations. Once again, everybody, please continue your conversations outside.

We'll now be beginning with our next set of guests. Please provide them the same respect that you gave our previous guests. Please maintain silence in the room while our members discuss these important issues.

We'd first like to begin with the Niagara Business and Innovation Fund. Fred Davies, you may now proceed with your presentation. You have seven minutes. Thank you.

Mr. Fred Davies: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Good afternoon. My name is Fred Davies. I'm the CEO of the

Niagara Business and Innovation Fund. Our fund has supported small businesses in Niagara since 1986, initially as part of the community futures program, but operating independently over the past five years or so.

We invest loan, equity and creative financial solutions to grow innovative companies here in Niagara. We recently founded the Blue Ocean Angels Canada group, which brings private investors and mentors together to help start-ups develop. I'm the executive-in-residence at the Niagara Falls Innovation Hub, where we also are a designated organization under IRCC for the Start-up Visa Program.

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Economic and community development has been part of our core mandate in Niagara for close to 40 years. We have a wide reach and a broad range of activities all impacted by the political and governance landscape here in Niagara. Having spent the better part of the last year and a half diving into the governance structure here in Niagara, I have to say that I still have not reached a rigid conclusion on new directions, other than that the status quo is not a sustainable option over the long term. I appreciate that this committee will take the time to consider the alternatives, both for the needs of today and the decades down the road. For the NBIF, we look to the long term for companies we help—not just the narrow view of today, but the economic landscape of tomorrow.

While the legislation was initially designed to deal with the housing crisis, clearly the review of governance in Niagara goes well beyond that, and it should. While housing may be an issue, it is a central problem around governance reform. As Professor Siegel—who I note is in the room today and is the pre-eminent academic on governance reform in Niagara—pointed out recently, we need to understand and define the problem before we come up with the long-term solutions. Are we over-governed? Do we have too many politicians? Do we have too much duplication? Are we overtaxed? Everyone would say yes, but that's a natural response, particularly in today's inflationary environment. Will municipal realignment save money?

For me, the question, or the problem, is more an economic one. Are we positioned to take advantage of our strategic advantages here in Niagara? Are we constructed adequately to be able to compete in an ever-changing investment and industrial landscape? Are we able to invest adequately in the infrastructure we need to be able to accommodate growth? Are 12 municipalities, one regional government, multiple agencies, boards, commissions restricting or influencing growth?

One hundred years of amalgamation examples and virtually all of the academic literature show us that amalgamation as the sole motivation, in and of itself, does not save money. This is not because money has not been saved, but governments tend to spend money when it suddenly shows up. When there are savings in one area, gaps are filled in another. That's the nature of the beast, so we must look beyond that concept if we're moving forward in a positive way.

For me, the central question is, "Is Niagara positioned to win in an intensely competitive global landscape?" Do we have the capacity through 13 independent governments to be able to invest strategically and equitably to benefit all of Niagara? Whether this is one city, three, four or more, or a realigned status quo, research shows that the most successful governance changes are homegrown. Coerced or imposed changes have led to a myriad of problems, from common pool effect, depletion of reserves, delayed investments and unusual policy initiatives before or after changes in governance structure.

The Niagara Business and Innovation Fund is often competing in a disparate environment where there is a high level of confusion over who does what and why. The business and investment community want seamless pathways and cohesive economic development policy. As a former economic development officer in Port Colborne almost four years ago, I would say to my colleagues that my mission was to prove that there was life south of Highway 20, the effective division between north and south Niagara. Back then, we operated in silos, defending our own backyard and competing with all other communities in Niagara. We have made progress, but we are still in a have and have-not investment environment.

If governance reform is to take place, please take the time to look at a much broader picture and don't rush. The best change happens at the local level. Give us parameters but give us the time to do a comprehensive evaluation of the options and the financial implications involved with change.

The most successful municipal realignments have been developed locally over coerced or imposed change. There is evidence of this here in Ontario with previous amalgamations and many case studies. This entire question goes beyond basic municipal boundaries, but also capital, debt and financial capacity, access to long-term capital reserves and an equitable assessment base.

Niagara, in my view, is also going to be the natural target for new investment in the next decade and beyond. Please take the time to look at more than just housing. We need to look at how we improve our brand on a global stage, and that means taking the long-game approach to governance reform in this region. Thank you.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal): Thank you very much, Mr. Davies.

We would now like to start the presentation of Greater Niagara Chamber of Commerce. Mishka Balsom, you may start your presentation.

Ms. Mishka Balsom: Thank you very much. On behalf of our board and our members, I wanted to thank you for the opportunity, actually, and we are grateful for your—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal): Sorry to interrupt you, Mishka. Please state your name for the record as well, just for Hansard.

Ms. Mishka Balsom: Mishka Balsom with the Greater Niagara Chamber of Commerce.

On behalf of our board and members, I wanted to express that we are thankful for the opportunity to be here today, and we are very grateful for your willingness to actually re-examine existing governance structures, looking

at the best ways to deliver the service for Niagarans but also across Ontario.

The Greater Niagara Chamber of Commerce is one of Ontario's largest chambers. We're members of the Ontario and the Canadian chambers of commerce as well. For about 10-plus years, we have received the chamber's accreditation with distinction, acknowledgement for the work that we have done. It is my pleasure to actually look around the room and see the four MPPs who we have worked closely with on a number of issues.

I also wanted to say that as a chamber, we are data-driven and evidence-based, and we are trying to come forward from that perspective in all that we do.

I've listened to part of the conversation for the last little while here, and I think Niagara's political classes are wondering what all this will mean. Will the region be abolished? Will there be a single city of Niagara? Will the province break up the region into three, four, or other models that you are looking at? On behalf of the Greater Niagara Chamber of Commerce and our members in the business community, we feel that these questions actually miss the mark overall. It is less about, to a degree, what the government actually looks like but what it actually does and how it delivers the services. I think that needs to be the discussion and the focus that we need to have.

Government has an opportunity, and an important one, to put function first in this particular review. What government does is more important than what it looks like, and that is a reflection of what our membership is saying. We want the best and the most efficient government services. For instance, any new business anywhere in Niagara is good for all of Niagara. It's not only for that municipality; it's good for whichever one it is.

Our economic development departments do a great job at attracting new businesses, but imagine what they could do if the resources were pulled together. We know you can get more when you buy in bulk, but procurement and purchasing remains divided across the region, even for facilities that will end up within sight of each other. Solving our problems with housing and homelessness needs coordinated approaches, not a patchwork.

In looking at Niagara's governance structure, in looking at the background, it has been mentioned previously in previous presentations that of all the Ontario census divisions with populations over 250,000, Niagara has the highest number of municipal politicians per capita. The average is 10 elected officials per 100,000 residents. Niagara has 28. The number of Niagara region councillors per 25 residents varies from 1.1 to 3.9 in Niagara. This effectively creates, actually, a democratic deficit for certain municipalities, which was also expressed by Mayor Siscoe just a few minutes ago.

The large number of elected officials in Niagara, many representing small communities, necessitates that almost all of them but a handful are actually in a part-time position. There are advantages and disadvantages to that.

When you listen to Niagara's municipalities, they have also spoken about the challenges, when it comes to resources, of attracting staff, keeping staff and the skill sets

that are needed to deal with the challenges as we're moving forward, because the decisions are becoming more complex and more challenging. A recent Financial Accountability Office of Ontario report showed the significant impact that the climate crisis will have on municipal infrastructure maintenance alone. We're already behind, and there's more to come. This is a strong example of how resources need to be marshalled and decision-making ability improved to cope with the challenges that we are facing.

Niagara's government has already taken some steps in the right direction, and we really congratulate them on it. We've heard examples of Lincoln now sharing fire and library services with other municipalities. Lincoln and St. Catharines have a tourism partnership that's there. In 2023, Chair Jim Bradley announced the region was creating new offices dedicated to shared services and attainable housing. We finally also have a single transit commission.

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But the challenges are there at the present. Niagara has a mixed composition, with three urban centres and nine rural municipalities. This creates a disparity in levies and service delivery. Rural municipalities lacking an industrial base for revenue and representing a large geographical area may struggle to deliver the services if the government structure is now rearranged.

Concerns regarding preserving the character of a municipality have been heard throughout the day, and it's evident that this is being raised while they're looking at a possible merger. But it should also be noted—and has been noted in some of the presentations here, too—that the ability to actually have the municipality and the identity of that can be preserved and has been preserved.

In 2019, the government did a review, and MPP Oosterhoff actually held many consultations in his own geographic region. Every single individual who went up to the microphone—no one said they were in Lincoln. Everyone was in Beamsville, Jordan or somewhere else; that's how they expressed it. Community is expressed by the environment that we have, and it has been maintained, even 50 years after it has already been brought together. So we have an opportunity here to preserve it.

Our ask for this government is to look at—this review is being looked at as a means to an end, which will allow greater effectiveness in tackling local issues that are there, such as housing, the infrastructure backlog, improved future resilience, tax savings and/or better service delivery for local residents, non-profits and businesses. What we are asking from you is to reduce the overlaps and address inequalities of services through structural revisions of municipalities and officials, promoting consistent strategy and access to talent. It is needed in Niagara. Eliminate the duplication, define government roles clearly and consider consolidating certain functions into a single tier. We suggest that some roles, such as economic development, planning and public procurement may be more effective in a single tier of government.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal): Thirty seconds remaining.

Ms. Mishka Balsom: Include the Niagara business community in governance consultations to align with Ontario's business-friendly approach. We're also asking at the same time that you consider the 2019 Fenn and Seiling report, as it provides critical insights into municipal performance through a broad survey and public consultations that had taken place at that time.

I thank you for the opportunity to be here today.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal): I'd now like to pass the mike to Michelle Seaborn. Please state your name for Hansard, and you may begin.

Ms. Michelle Seaborn: Thank you, Mr. Chair. My name is Michelle Seaborn. I've lived in Niagara for 36 years and have watched my community and those around me change over time. I'm currently a regional councillor for Grimsby. I am a two-term municipal councillor. I chaired economic development for 12 years in Grimsby and participated in their official plan in 2008. I haven't always been happy about development, but I do understand it is necessary and needs to be done right the first time.

The region of Niagara is made up of 12 unique communities, similar in that we've all had early histories involving Indigenous people, historical events around the War of 1812, the Underground Railway and the ever-changing demographics and boundaries. All have places of interest for tourism, whether it involves natural beauty, landscapes, our farms or historical events and buildings, and yet we're all different.

The province of Ontario wants to build more homes faster, and has asked local municipalities and region to work together to accomplish this. With an expected population growth of more than 200,000 people in the region by 2051 and a desire to build 1.5 million new homes in the province before 2031, now more than ever, we must learn to work together. Local municipalities know their communities better than anybody else from other municipalities within the same region. Each municipality has a history, character and residents who love being there. Respect for uniqueness in each community needs to be maintained.

In Grimsby, for example, the official plan laid out a plan for increased density in an area not yet developed. From the ground up, the plan was put in place to have one area of the town as a high-density community with condos, townhomes and businesses to complete the total community feel for the area. Development charges were used for infrastructure, beautification of the area, parks, water trails and a sandy beach created by armouring revetments. This allowed the rest of Grimsby to maintain the small-town character by keeping future development to infilling, brownfield developments and low-rise developments. The Niagara Escarpment Commission and the greenbelt limit the areas within Grimsby above the escarpment.

Our local municipalities will be planning their development in keeping with the character of their community. Whether it's a focus on redeveloping the downtown core,

rehabilitation of brownfield areas or brand new developments within the community, each will have a signature of that municipality and the people who call it home.

In Niagara, there are over 38,000 approved residential units or short-term supply units currently unbuilt. While communities are trying to expedite the process to complete these units, there are forces not within the municipalities' or the region's control. So why aren't developers building currently?

(1) The high interest rates and the cost of financing for development, the lack of supplies and materials, the lack of skilled trades and the labour force shortage, and the individual business plans and approaches for some developers and their ability to scale up and build more houses. The Ministries of Education and Labour are pushing the programs for skilled trades and are streamlining the process. However, this will take time.

(2) There are instances where developers are waiting on infrastructure. Industry and manufacturing want sizable pieces of land, which are available throughout Niagara, but they lack the infrastructure in place to begin building. We need to be able to offer serviced areas and lots for these interested businesses so that we have good-paying jobs to support the people who are hoping to be attracted to the region.

(3) While there is still a high demand for housing, high interest rates are also impacting potential homeowners from entering the market. Many first-time homebuyers are having a hard time securing financing for their first home. There's also a very real concern that if mortgage rates continue to rise, many current homeowners will be forced to either downsize or refinance their homes over a longer period of time.

(4) Another situation that causes delays in building homes or getting other developments moving is the appeals process with the Ontario Land Tribunal. Too often, a developer or an individual unhappy with the decision of council will choose to appeal at the OLT without a valid basis for doing so, which causes further delay. The time between the application until a decision has been made can be very long and can lead to a second appeal. Perhaps an increased standard for appeals, making it harder to appeal a decision of council, would lessen the number of complaints.

So how do we move forward? What we really need is stability in governance. Every time governance changes, the rules change and time is needed to adapt. We also need to focus on getting things done. We need to have infrastructure in place. We need to be working with local municipalities and offering assistance and guidance where needed.

The region works together with local municipalities to take care of the big-ticket items, such as roads and transportation, transit, water and waste water, public health, police and emergency services, as well as waste management. Labour-intensive projects or departments could be left to local area municipalities.

Amalgamation is not going to speed up housing; it will likely cause more delays and distraction to the goals set

forward. It may spin the entire region and our municipalities into chaos and will likely not cause the taxpayers any savings—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal): Thirty seconds remaining.

Ms. Michelle Seaborn: That's not going to work. So I will conclude with what one of the province's roles will be. The introduction of Bill 23, with the removal of development fees for municipalities and the region, has left a gaping hole in the ability to put much-needed infrastructure in the ground prior to development. Niagara has had many areas attracting manufacturing and industrial employment, but the lack of infrastructure is hampering the economic development which is—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal): Thank you very much for your presentation. That concludes our time allocated.

We'll move to the official opposition. MPP Jeff Burch.

Mr. Jeff Burch: Thank you to all the presenters for your thoughtful presentations.

I want to start by saying that we had some very interesting presentations throughout the day. We heard from lots of different municipalities—as always, in Niagara, many different opinions. I think it's somewhat unfortunate that we've gone down the governance-structure rabbit hole when we really want to focus on housing.

1530

The purpose of this committee, as the minister himself has said, is to examine whether two-tier governments in the six regions support or hinder the construction of new homes and examine whether certain services could be combined or moved from one level of government to another. So that's what we are focusing on, and certainly we can talk about governance structures in relation to whether or not that speeds up the construction of housing, which is really what we're supposed to be after.

I want to start with you, Mishka. Thank you for your presentation. I'm glad that you started out by saying you're data-driven and evidence-based. It's something I think that this committee—that's what we want to look at, evidence.

One of the things—and I was able to touch on this with Mayor Siscoe—was that, in the region of Peel, to the government's credit, they drew back on that. There's an old saying in carpentry—I'm not a very good carpenter, but—"measure twice, cut once," and that doesn't always happen with government. To the government's credit, they saw that that was going sideways. There was a huge tax increase expected because, as it turns out, dissolving a regional municipality is very, very expensive and disruptive. There were, like, 250 employees leaving Peel per week at the time. That's why they cut it off so quickly.

It's important that we understand the costs and the ramifications of making these decisions. I think Fred was getting at this in his presentation too, that we should take a long view of this and think things out. But I'm just wondering if you could comment on that. I know that the business lingo is "constant improvement"—as opposed to going in like a bull in a china shop, having evidence for

decisions that are made. Would it really be a good idea to not only dissolve a region but get into forced amalgamations in the middle of an affordability crisis and a housing crisis in the province, or should we take a more measured approach?

Ms. Mishka Balsom: Thank you very much for your question. I look at it twofold, and especially because you brought up the region of Peel as well. I think it's been very interesting to see the challenge that not only Niagara municipalities face, but municipalities, especially smaller municipalities, across Ontario in maintaining and keeping and retaining the talent that they need. It's something that is mirrored in the private sector as well. It has been a big challenge for organizations, and the costs of not being able to retain them or attract them are huge. The opportunity costs of the losses are significant. I know that the region of Peel, or Brampton specifically, I think, hired Deloitte to do a report to outline the cost that's there.

I think one of the things that I always appreciate is that if this government is undergoing this review—and I think businesses appreciate it too—it should be data-driven. It should be evidence-based. What is the data that maybe would support a change? What would the change look like?

From a business perspective and from our members' perspective, I think they welcome the opportunity that there is a more efficient way to do something. It is hard to look at a business or a structure 50 years into it and say, "We can't improve."

I think we were encouraged when, in 2019 and 2020, the provincial government actually put funding forward to the region, saying, "You can look at it. We're making this funding available for you to improve it." Regrettably, the region actually did not really take advantage of it. It was only some small areas of it where it was looked at, saying, "Here's how we can improve." And, again, I think it's an opportunity for us to move forward.

One of the things that our membership very clearly has said is that there is a significant amount of information in the 2019 report, the Fenn and Seiling report. The extensive research that so many organizations have gone through and the input that's there—I think if that information can be released, that information can be taken into consideration when we're looking for solutions in better delivering services. I think it is something that we would really support.

Mr. Jeff Burch: Okay. Thank you for that.

Throughout the day, some of the presentations we heard—actually, because this kind of amalgamation thing has been floated out there, a lot of the comments were about that. From some of the municipalities—and I'll speak because I know the ones in my riding. Thorold, Port Colborne, Welland are one, two and three in terms of meeting their housing targets, especially Thorold and Port Colborne. It's very clear that they're doing their job. You're familiar with the multimodal corridor. They're doing some great work collaborating, and they're meeting their housing targets. Welland is at over 200%. Thorold is the eighth-fastest-growing municipality in Canada.

They've made it pretty clear that major disruptions—and Michelle touched on this—in terms of governance are going to disrupt that success they're having. So there's that.

I was also hoping that you could comment on the formula that's being used, which, I'm sure you've heard, for municipalities to access that \$1.2 billion, is based on shovels in the ground. Municipalities really have no control over shovels in the ground, and it has been touched on already that it has to do with inflation and the cost of building. There aren't really the carrots and sticks available, and what we're seeing now is a slowdown of building.

Ms. Mishka Balsom: I appreciate the question—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal): One minute remaining.

Ms. Mishka Balsom: I just wanted to say I think the challenges that you have pointed out are challenges that have been faced across all municipalities, whatever the governance structure is, and across municipalities all across Canada. So I'm not sure if that particular issue is one that is so closely related to the governance challenges that we have, versus, actually, the economic factors and drivers that we currently have. I'm not sure if I want to pull them as quickly together—it could be. But when you look and follow other news across Canada and all other areas, they are facing the same challenges, so I think they're more economic than governance-structure-based, if that makes sense.

Mr. Jeff Burch: Yes, it does.

How many—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal): Twenty seconds left.

Mr. Jeff Burch: I'll wrap it up there.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal): We'll now move to our independent member. MPP McMahon, you may now proceed.

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: I have a much shorter time to ask questions, so hopefully your answers will be succinct.

First of all, thank you for coming in today. I'm from Toronto, so this is helpful—this map and all these stories, and hearing from the local MPPs, and from you especially.

Over to Michelle: Did you want to finish your thoughts? I know you got cut off.

Ms. Michelle Seaborn: Yes, I guess I got a bit too wordy there at one point.

I was actually just going to try to make the comparison with the amalgamation with Hamilton. In 2001, they spread out and took over a lot of the local municipalities with the hope that they would save money and what have you. That model didn't work too well, because what they ended up with was total chaos, and it has taken many, many years for the smaller communities within that combined city to get the things that Niagara already offers them. So they're just getting the transit in place for the smaller outlying communities. They're providing one police force, one public health, one of everything, instead of a bunch of small ones, and ironically, their costs have

gone up. So with their governance being only 17, their fees, because they now have to hire employees, are now double all of the governance of Niagara. So I'm not sure they saved any money at all, and they did put the residents through quite a shaky period there for a while.

Interjections.

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: Thank you.

I was just a little distracted because—continually, Chair, I'm distracted by my colleagues. I'm here to listen. It has been going on for quite a while, and I'm calling it out. Can we be respectful?

The Acting Chair (Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal): I'd like to ask the government members to please keep it down on their side.

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: Sorry about that. I'm here, listening.

You're a regional councillor now, and you were a councillor for two terms in Grimsby. How did the current status quo model work out for you then, and how do you feel it's working out now?

Ms. Michelle Seaborn: I was a municipal councillor for eight years, four years ago. This is my first term at the municipal level, and it's a totally different beast. From the municipal level, you're working really closely with the residents of your community, so you're doing the recreation services thing and you're doing the local roads. Everything is really, really close to home.

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Whereas in the region, although you're taking care of your municipality, you're looking at the whole picture as well. Where you might want to make a particular decision on something that might benefit one community, you have to look at the entire picture. It becomes a little bit more difficult.

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: Okey-dokey. I'm just going to leave it there. Thanks.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal): Thank you, MPP McMahon.

As per keeping the volume low, that's not just for the government members; that's all members, as well as members in the audience.

I'd like to move on to the government side. MPP Sam Oosterhoff, you have the floor.

Mr. Sam Oosterhoff: My thanks to those who presented. It's very interesting having a couple of representatives from the business community. We've had a lot of politicians so far today—I think almost exclusively politicians, if my memory serves. I'm a politician, so I can say this about politicians: When you talk to politicians, a lot of politicians say there are never too many politicians. I think we heard from a fair number of people today who are politicians; they seem to be okay with the status quo. There was also a lot of appetite for change and a recognition, even among those who might be content with having the various structures in place, that there are opportunities for service delivery changes or opportunities for streamlining or removing some duplications. I think that there are some different themes that are coming through.

I do want to just thank you, first of all, for speaking on behalf of the business community, because a lot of the questions that I've been trying to raise throughout the day have been ones that I've had independent job creators come to me and ask, myself, especially with a couple of the budgets over the past couple of years—actually some of the highest in Ontario for budget increases—just a question around what's happening, curious about how those dollars are spent and sometimes curious about how decisions are getting made when they frankly feel like there are so many people who are elected to these offices and then they're not always seeing what needs to happen, happen.

I want to ask just a broad question. We've seen our governance structure evolve over the past 54 years, but really it's the same one we had in 1970. Niagara is very different than it was in 1970. It's not the same. I wasn't around in 1970, but I hear it's very different than it was then, and in 50 years it will be very different again. We're going to be hitting almost a million people.

My question to Councillor Seaborn is, if you want stability, you don't want disruption, you don't want change—reading between the lines—and yet we're going to grow to almost a million people, how do you square that circle? We need to see changes that reflect where the population is going, where the economy is going. Do you want to see any changes at all, or just stability means nothing?

Ms. Michelle Seaborn: No, we do need some changes. There's no two ways about that.

Mr. Sam Oosterhoff: Which ones?

Ms. Michelle Seaborn: Let's see. Let's work a little bit closer with the province. I think from a regional perspective we need to be working closer with the province. I think partially some of the problems we're having today are from lack of services from the province. Bill 23 threw a screwdriver in the whole carriage there, and we suddenly found—

Mr. Sam Oosterhoff: But specifically I was asking about the structure that we have currently, for 54 years. You think as long as the province does more, then it will all work fine? You don't see any changes over the next 50 years?

Ms. Michelle Seaborn: Everything has changed in the last 50 years. And I'm going by what my parents told me as well there—ha, ha.

Anyway, yes we have. I'm looking at communities right now. I'm going to take Lincoln for example. There's like 15 different communities that now make up Lincoln, and they're doing fine. But they still refer to themselves as Attercliffe or whatever, so—

Mr. Sam Oosterhoff: Isn't that kind of making the point then?

Ms. Michelle Seaborn: It is, and I think in that sense they did. They're all communities, they're all similar, and they all have the same purpose.

Lincoln is not the same as Niagara-on-the-Lake, which is not the same as Welland, which is not the same as St. Catharines. We all have our own different needs and

our own different communities that we're working to try and get together. I don't see a problem with having 12 communities. I never have. Even back in 2019 when it was approached, I didn't think amalgamation was the right thing at that time either.

I think we've proved as municipalities that we can work together with other communities, and I think it's wonderful that we have a shared fire department. We do have libraries that work within a full system, whether it's us and Lincoln or within the rest of the Niagara Peninsula. They are working together. I think procurement is one of the biggest things we could do—

Mr. Sam Oosterhoff: I'm going to break in there, though—because many of them aren't, right?

Ms. Michelle Seaborn: No.

Mr. Sam Oosterhoff: You can pick examples and say, "Here's a couple that are; here's Lincoln and"—

Ms. Michelle Seaborn: But we should.

Mr. Sam Oosterhoff: Right. So Lincoln and Grimsby, or you could say the Lincoln library. Those are the kinds of examples people point to. You could say some back offices, but that's a couple, out of all of them. And then the rest of them—

Ms. Michelle Seaborn: But there could be more.

Mr. Sam Oosterhoff: It could be more. In 2019, after that report or the visit, there was the sense—at least, that I saw—that people wanted to make changes. They wanted to see things improved and they were committed to doing so, but now here we are five years later.

Aside from Niagara Region Transit, which took 20 years to come to fruition, it feels as though very little has changed, and that's why—I guess my question would be to Fred: Do you think things will change without recommendations from the committee that are implemented by the government to put in place some of those changes and to make sure that some of those changes happen? Or do you think that there is going to be enough organic support in this room and other rooms like it to make those hard decisions on their own?

Mr. Fred Davies: Thank you for the question, Mr. Oosterhoff. As I said in my remarks, I haven't got a firm position on this yet because I want to hear the facts. As Mishka said, we need to base our decisions on facts and data. But the status quo is not sustainable in the long term. And I say that both—for the record, I'm also a regional councillor, so when you say you've got the business community here, I'm also a politician—so, bad on me.

I have to look back at 40 years in business in this region, both in the public sector as an EDO and in the private sector as a builder. We need changes. We need to talk about a model that is going to serve the next 50 years. And, as you suggest, we're going to have a million people in this region over the next 15 to 20 years. The changes we make now are going to impact 50 years down the road, so that's why my recommendation is to take the time to do this right. But I think Niagarans are ready to have this conversation. Everybody that's in this room—

Mr. Sam Oosterhoff: But I'm going to push you on that because sometimes it feels like all committees do is

take time. There's been a lot of time spent on these conversations. There's been a lot of models brought forward and there doesn't seem to have been exactly a clear consensus. So if they have to make a recommendation, if the committee has to make a report—which they do—and it implies some governance changes, what changes would you want to see?

Mr. Fred Davies: Okay, let me clarify this because initially, the legislation was going to appoint a facilitator to come to Niagara, where we anticipated a long and fruitful relationship with that individual to go over and develop the data and understand the options. I don't think this committee can do this all in one day here in Niagara.

Mr. Sam Oosterhoff: No, but they will have to make recommendations.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal): Thirty seconds remaining.

Mr. Fred Davies: I get that, but the recommendation may be, "Let's go back to Niagara and help Niagara create a made-in-Niagara alternative" and create options that we bring together. Because coerced amalgamations are the ones that are the least successful. History has told us that, and the academic research supports that.

Let Niagara create a made-in-Niagara solution, whether that's one city or four or a reimagined status quo. I'm not sure that we're there yet.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal): Thank you very much, Mr. Davies. That concludes the time allotted to the government members.

And now back to the official opposition: MPP Jeff Burch.

Mr. Jeff Burch: Some good comments, and I just want to talk for a moment about the difference between status quo and continuous change. Not everyone in the room was here for presentations throughout the day, but there were all kinds of examples of how municipalities were working together, how they're looking at their governance structures. As a matter of fact, Fort Erie and some other lower-tier municipalities have made changes to their governance. Fort Erie has recently gone from nine representatives to seven. So these things are happening. I don't want people to get the impression that there's just this status quo and no change in the region. Municipalities have actually been pretty good, especially over the last number of years, in coming together, and I think Mishka knows that, as well. There is always room for improvement, but I wanted to say that.

I wanted to get back to—it kind of surprises me that we're still talking about this—why we have 126 politicians in Niagara. I used to joke with the former Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing because, in his riding, he's got a lot of rural, small municipalities. He had more part-time councillors than Niagara has in his riding. So it's not uncommon, and they're actually quite effective. I can understand and have some sympathy for arguments where—do we need 32 councillors sitting around the regional table from a functional point of view? But this idea that there's just too many politicians without actually delving into,

"Well, what do the politicians do? Are they part-time? Are they full-time?"—what's the evidence for this?

1550

I can't think of a better deal in terms of representation for taxpayers than part-time politicians. I did it for two terms; I made \$18,000 and worked my butt off, and it was some of the best-representation times of my life in politics. People love their community and that's why they do it, and I don't like hearing it run down all the time, this number that we have, 126 politicians: Michelle, you kind of touched on it, so maybe you want to comment on that.

Ms. Michelle Seaborn: Yes, so it does sound like a really big number. There are 12 communities. Each has their own set of municipal councillors, and then most communities will send their mayor and one also elected official to sit on the regional desk. The bigger communities, of course, have more elected to the regional table.

I think the closer you get to the people, the more important it is that you have people that are listening to them. From a municipal point of view, at no other point in government are you closer to your representatives. You should feel comfortable talking to your municipal people. And when you start getting communities that are fairly big in size but very small in population, it becomes even more important that you've got somebody that you can go to.

So if, for example, you have somebody like Lincoln, and I don't mean to pick on them—I'm sorry; I'm going to change that to West Lincoln. West Lincoln has got a big land mass, but they've only got 13,000 or 14,000 people in that area. Now, if they only had the one representative per X number of population, there would be no representation. So I think it's important that you have good municipal representation, but then you also need to have somebody at the municipal level. For example, the mayor has a lot of work to do. If he can't always be the representative at the municipal level, it's good that he has somebody else that can pick up that slack. So I don't think numbers count; I really don't.

I'll go back again to Hamilton and say Hamilton had X number of community members, each of them sending people to governance. They now have 17, but their expenses have doubled that of the entire 126 people at the region of Niagara, and it's because they've now become full-time, and they've now hired staff. They've lost the ability to get out there and to see people because they're now relying on staff to do it. I don't want to see that, and I don't think we're there.

Mr. Jeff Burch: Yes. Thorold talked about that earlier. They came out with some numbers, and I think less than half of 1% is spent on all of their politicians. They're part-time. They feel they're effective. I live in Thorold; I know that most people like that form of government, being able to call somebody that represents them, that they elect, when they have a problem. Do you think it's unreasonable to spend less than half a per cent of your budget to make sure that the people who are paying all the bills have somebody to call when they have a problem?

Ms. Michelle Seaborn: I certainly think the people that are paying the taxes would expect to get some work out of

those people. If it's half a per cent—I don't think they really get down to that. They look at the big picture. But you're right, it's not a very big amount.

Mr. Jeff Burch: Maybe, Mishka, you would like to comment on that as well, because I know it's a common—and it's understandable coming from the business community. I understand that point of view. I understand frustration with the duplication and red tape that sometimes businesses experience, and sometimes they can forget that the people who pay the bills want representation. That number of 126 that's thrown out there all the time—maybe there are some improvements we can make, for example, the 32 at the region. But is it unreasonable for people to expect that they have grassroots political representation and a very small amount of the budget is spent on that?

Ms. Mishka Balsom: I think that, actually, people in Niagara appreciate that approach, appreciate what has been said here before and, actually, the accessibility to elected officials. But I want to bring to your attention again to that we are talking so very much about the structure versus the service delivery that we need to focus on.

We're looking at what is the name on the side of the bus, what is the name on top of our tax bill, but the truth is, that's not what Niagarans actually are wanting and it's not what our businesses are asking for. They are actually asking, "Let the bus come when I want it to come to where it comes. Let it be efficient when it comes to transportation. Let it be efficient when it comes to services." And I think this is where we're missing the conversation. The conversation is maybe—yes, we can spend a lot of time talking about 126, or should it be 87, or should it be 13? I don't know, and the business community actually agrees that they don't know. But I think what we need to focus on is the service delivery, the challenges that we're facing, and how we're going to deliver it.

I want to also bring one thing back to it. Yes, the accessibility and access to—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal): Thirty seconds remaining.

Ms. Mishka Balsom:—local politicians is good, but the current structure, part-time, hinders a lot of people to put their name forward. We could have a significant number of very capable people who would come forward. Lots of women, actually, cannot afford to put their name forward in the current structure. So there are advantages to it, but there are disadvantages at the same time, and I think that we need to address them.

Mr. Jeff Burch: You can make those improvements without forcibly amalgamating municipalities. Thank you very much.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal): Now we're moving on to MPP McMahon.

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: It is great to have people here from the business community, as well, just to round all the ideas out.

I'll start with Mishka. I liked what you said: What government does is more important than what it looks like.

That's really poignant and important for us to hear over and over again.

Do you feel that the intentions of this regional review are fully clear to you—why we're doing this?

Ms. Mishka Balsom: From the perspective of the business community, I think it's an opportunity to look at a standard of looking at the service delivery and the promises that are being made to Ontarians, the promises that are being made to people in Niagara, and to see if the system and the current structure actually allows us to deliver on the current promises that are made—as well as, I think, the business community to also see us as saying, "Are we future-proof?" I think MPP Sam Oosterhoff has mentioned a number of times the sense of, are we ready for the population growth that we have; are we ready for the climate changes that are coming our way; are we future-proof at the same time? I think that the business community understands it that way and sees it as such.

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: Speaking of future-proof, you were mentioning certain areas for better service delivery or more connected service delivery, procurement purchasing, homelessness, housing, and the one that I caught on to: climate action.

Do you feel that this government is currently doing enough on climate action? What would you see as strong, necessary climate action right now?

Ms. Mishka Balsom: May I ask if you're referring to the Niagara government or if you're referring to the Ontario?

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: Niagara—which maybe we could roll out to all of Ontario.

Ms. Mishka Balsom: I think it's an excellent question. I believe that likely there are governments across the country who are saying we need to do significantly more than what we are doing currently.

In the fall of 2023, the region held their second climate summit, their green action summit here in Niagara. It was held at Brock University, bringing together key stakeholders from a number of different industries, sectors—expertise to really identify what some of the other municipalities are doing, what some of the other regions in Ontario are doing, where they're leading. Toronto has had some really good standards that they have put in place, which are admirable, and I think you had an expert speaking on that as well.

So I think there was a recognition that we need to do more than what we are currently doing, and I think that awareness is in place, and that is a commitment that especially the young population would like to see. Their number one fear is related to, actually, not unemployment and other areas; it's about the climate change and the uncertainty related to it. So I think there's a recognition in Niagara that we need to do more, and I think in our ability to do more, we need to collaborate.

I just wanted to say that collaboration is not easy. All of you are in a position where you have to collaborate. You know how difficult it is to collaborate with the federal government, with your neighbouring provinces, with the municipalities, with other individuals. We need to make that

process easier so that we get the results that I think all of us are looking for.

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: Yes. Climate anxiety out there is quite real, especially among the younger generation.

Fred, I don't want to leave you out of the loop. Do you think we are rushing this regional review right now? You keep talking about taking time. Do you feel we're rushing it? How would you do it methodically?

Mr. Fred Davies: Well, I think it's important that we get it right. If you're going to restructure Niagara—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal): Thirty seconds remaining.

Mr. Fred Davies: Thank you.

We've had so many studies proposing several models. As a regional councillor and somebody who is involved in economic development, mostly in south Niagara, it's important to me that we get it right. We have 12 municipalities. Is that going to be the same structure in 50 years? I don't think so. Let's just get a—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal): Thank you very much, Mr. Davies. That concludes our time allocated there.

1600

Now I would like to move to the government side. MPP Billy Pang.

Mr. Billy Pang: Chair, through you: Thank you for the presentations from different sectors, different angles.

I have the same questions for all three of you. The first one is: Since the regional government was set up, it has been 54 years. To change or not change is always an issue. It takes time. How long do you think is appropriate? Now we are dealing with a housing crisis—it's a crisis mode, not a normal mode—so can we take forever? In your opinion, how long should it take to restructure or redistribute or whatever you think? There should be some significant change after 54 years. Any one of you can start.

Mr. Fred Davies: The amalgamations in the past, in Niagara, have taken several years to complete. So after the legislation was referred to the committee, when the facilitators were removed from the process, I think you've—this is tightening the timeline to your report on this legislation. My question is, is there an opportunity for us here in Niagara to help contribute more than just one day to the development of that report? Can we set up a consultation process where people who are stakeholders here in Niagara can make a more broad and detailed presentation? Just hearing from politicians today is, really, in my view, not the answer when we're—

Mr. Billy Pang: How long does it take? My question is about the length of time. One month? One year? One century?

Mr. Fred Davies: Well, I think it's going to take at least another year to put a consultation process together. None of the amalgamations in the past have taken less time than that, unless they were imposed. The last time, in Chatham-Kent, I think there was a 90-day period when the municipalities were given an opportunity to put their own homemade solutions—

Mr. Billy Pang: How about the other two presenters?

Ms. Michelle Seaborn: I will admit that it will take some time, because I think one group of people we haven't spoken to is our residents. I think they should also have some impact into this. It affects them, as well.

Will there be change? I think so. Whether or not it's 12 communities that are now higher populations—because we're going to be putting 200,000 people somewhere in this community; we're not going to come up with another community of 200,000 people. So I think there's going to be change. I think you're looking at a couple of years. I think it has to be done right, and it has to be done right the first time.

Ms. Mishka Balsom: Thank you very much for the question.

I don't want to be cynical here, but it's tied to this election cycle. That's really what it is. The parties and stakeholders will change. We don't know who's going to sit around the table here next time—who's going to be mayor, who's going to be the chair, which party is going to lead, and who has the appetite for actually making that change. So we're tied to this election cycle. We depend on this Ontario provincial government to make the change, because we don't know what it will look like next time, when we move forward from here. So that's what I'm looking at. I think we have seen that on a number of proposals that have come forward that, by the time an election is over, were off the table and were changed, and the mandate had changed. So I think this election cycle is what we really are tied to if we want to see a change.

Mr. Billy Pang: I asked this question because, as I mentioned earlier, we are in a crisis mode. So, as a tsunami is chasing us, maybe we don't have that time frame—that we have a lot of time to discuss into the very, very, very detail.

We were talking about representatives earlier. We have different municipalities. I am from the GTA. I'm from Markham. Every single block is a very different community. We always need to balance how many elected officials—I won't put it as “politicians”—we need; how to balance that to make things move smoother: more effective and more efficient. So now we are discussing two directions, restructure or status quo, right? So maybe something in between. When we are talking about representatives that we need to represent in a certain community, can you share with us what your perspective is on how to balance that?

Ms. Mishka Balsom: Do you mind if I start?

Ms. Michelle Seaborn: Not at all.

Ms. Mishka Balsom: There has been extensive research done on this particular topic that is actually available to you and that is very much data-driven. At what point is the most efficient government dependent on the number and the population that is in place? As you had pointed out, rightfully, Hamilton is not as efficient in that size. In my memory right now, I'm saying that the representation is based at around 200,000, for a population, that you can maximize some of the services and some of the service delivery.

But I think there's data that's out that's available to you when you decide, and if you move forward, extensive research that has been done on this particular topic that actually says, at this point, our municipal services are maximized. You attract the people, you retain the people and you deliver the best services at the best rate to the communities that you're serving. I would redirect this commission to actually look at that data. It's quite effective.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal): There's a minute remaining.

Mr. Fred Davies: Yes, I won't take much time. I agree with Mishka on this. There is significant research on governance review that I would recommend to the committee.

I've spent a lot of time on this over the last year and a half, and the magic number for the number of politicians—who knows what that is. You can determine that unilaterally because we are creatures of the province. I don't know what that number is, but I know it's not a sustainable number at 126 for the 465,000 people we have here in Niagara.

Ms. Michelle Seaborn: Well, I'm not really sure how to answer that question in about, what, three seconds?

I think we have to watch what each group is doing too. I think the one thing that's been missing here is where your talent is as well. So, from the regional perspective, we have top-notch people who are helping our municipalities to do a better job. I'm not counting the number of elected officials. What is the region doing—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal): Thank you very much.

That concludes the time that we have for today. We thank you so much for taking the time out and making your presentations to this committee. Thank you for all of that that you have done.

MR. BRUCE TIMMS

CORPORATION OF THE TOWN
OF PELHAM

MR. CHRIS MCQUEEN

The Acting Chair (Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal): We'll now be moving towards our next guests that are scheduled to appear. If Bruce Timms, the town of Pelham and Chris McQueen can please take their seats, we will begin shortly.

Ladies and gentlemen, we will now begin our next session, if all our guests can please be seated. To our guests who are setting up the projector, they can continue to do so and somebody else can present in the meantime.

1610

I'm just going to quickly mention that you have seven minutes allotted to you, and we will begin.

If we would like to start with Bruce Timms. Bruce, you may have the floor, and I would ask for silence from everyone in the room, please. Thank you.

Mr. Bruce Timms: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. My name is Bruce Timms, and I reside in St. Catharines. Thank you for the opportunity to speak to the standing committee regarding proposed improvements to Niagara governance, to remove barriers to housing and, my term is called, "modernizing" Niagara's governance structure.

I'd like to start by giving a quick summary of my own background as a lifelong Niagara resident as context for my remarks. I served as Niagara regional councillor in St. Catharines from 1991 to 2018—that's 27 years—and during that time I was heavily involved in several reviews, from adding a seat for Pelham and a seat for West Lincoln, to winning regional council and provincial support for the double-duty directly elected city/regional councillor model used in Durham, Halton and York. We won that agreement in 2015 before the city of St. Catharines, which subsequently decided not to move forward with that.

In addition, my 27 years as regional councillor have given me a fairly broad understanding of the responsibilities and requirements of municipal governance at both levels across the region. My own local long-term experience has also helped me frame an outlook as a resident on the current regional governance and how it might be improved, and I would focus on improved; not simply change, but improvement.

I grew up in Fonthill, in the town of Pelham. I worked in the family businesses in Welland and operated in St. Catharines. I've lived in St. Catharines since 1977 and operated a small business in St. Catharines and Grimsby, as well.

There are several reasons for the current level of dissatisfaction with the regional governance in Niagara, and I have evidence for that from many personal conversations over my time in office, many letters to the editor and editorial coverage in the Niagara dailies.

With all this in mind, I respectfully recommend three improvements to municipal governance in Niagara:

- (1) elect the regional chair by general vote;
- (2) adopt the directly elected city/regional double-duty council used in Durham, York and Halton regions; and
- (3) voluntary local mergers based on water and waste water infrastructure and existing urban clusters.

These changes will provide better political accountability, with minimal disruption costs and without delays in building more housing quickly.

I'll start with the first one, the election of the regional chair by general vote. This change is more important now than it ever has been before because of the strong-mayor powers given to the chair in Bill 39. Niagara's chair for each term is currently elected by 12 mayors and 20 regional councillors, newly elected for the term, not by the general public. A mandate from the general public is better than a mandate from the 17 votes you need at regional council to become chair. The chair needs to be accountable to all the voters of Niagara far more than the 17 votes at regional council.

Niagara is a diverse region with urban centres, rural small towns, industrial centres, agricultural centres and

major tourism centres. We have major transportation corridors, including the St. Lawrence Seaway, the Queen Elizabeth highway and international borders. So we are a diverse region with diverse interests.

I believe the people of Niagara will be served best by following the Durham region model and the Halton region model where, in both cases, the regional chair is elected by general vote. The election-at-large model is more important today because of Bill 39, which gives the head of regional council the new strong-mayor powers that the regional council chair never had before. This increases the need for the public to hear the policies, the direction, the philosophy of a candidate for regional chair, just like they do for a city mayor. When a city mayor campaigns, the candidate is telling the entire population, not just the city council, how they intend to proceed. Local surveys have shown that there is broad public support, in the range of 75%, for this course of action, much like the referendum on the question in Durham region in 2010. They elected their chair by general vote for the first time in 2014 as a result of the referendum.

A second reason for electing the regional chair by general vote is that the regional property taxes are now larger than the city property tax or the local-tier property tax, and that is because of the transfer of public transit from local to regional jurisdiction. The chair proposes a budget under the new strong-mayor powers and is therefore more responsible than ever for tax increases. The chair is now responsible for more of the property tax than a mayor, so they should be elected like a mayor.

The second item of change I want to see is—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal): Thirty seconds remaining.

Mr. Bruce Timms: Thirty seconds? Well, the second thing is to adopt Durham region model of double-duty councillors. I would say the changes to elect the chair and to move to double-duty councillors, to move to that model, would involve some staff time, but it would be largely confined to the clerk's department, with little effect on building more houses quickly.

The debate over improving municipal government in Niagara has come up many times over the years—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal): Thank you, Mr. Timms. That concludes the time allotted to your presentation. Thank you for your presentation.

We'd now like to call on the town of Pelham. Mayor Marvin Junkin, please state your name for Hansard.

Mr. Marvin Junkin: My name is Marvin Junkin, mayor of Pelham. I'd like to thank this committee for having the foresight to have the jewel of the region present last.

Anyway, if you read my presentation beforehand, you'll know that my background is agricultural and I'm a relative newbie to the political field. Some of my esteemed colleagues who have spoken to you today have had 25, 30 years in the municipal political field. My time in this field is eight years. I have grown into this system, and I have strong thoughts about where it is and where it should be going.

I'll get to my presentation now. I started off "good morning," not realizing that we would be putting in a farmer day today, and it is indeed 4 o'clock.

As mayor of Pelham, it is my pleasure to speak to you today on behalf of the municipality that I serve. The community of Pelham has shown their continued trust in me, electing me once as a councillor and then twice more as their mayor. Within my roles, I have always been dedicated to advocating on behalf of the over 18,000 local residents who call the town of Pelham home.

Pelham is a wonderful community with continuous growth, reasonable taxes and deeply caring residents who love living there. Pelham residents value local input in the community that they live in and have continued to be engaged in planning decisions, development of recreational services and the public services that impact their daily lives.

Residents in Pelham do not want to live in a city or be part of a larger community. They chose to live in a small progressive place and want it to stay that way. Residents have shared that they fear that a potential amalgamation will mean that their voices will be drowned out by the crowds of larger population centres within the region, and the benefits of our smaller community would be lost.

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Our continued success in Pelham and the high quality of life the community expects and enjoys depends truly on local leadership. The leadership in Pelham is from both municipal government and from the many service clubs and community groups who work together to create a caring and active community. These groups and dedicated volunteers collaborate with the town frequently to offer festivals and events fitting to Pelham, which reflect the local culture and history. If part of a larger community, I fear we will lose our unique ability to host local community events like our award-winning Pelham Summerfest.

Having spent my entire life in Pelham as a dairy farmer, I am also particularly concerned with how the agricultural communities in other amalgamations have been negatively affected by those decisions. These communities have suffered from a loss of representation and loss of their unique identity as they have been overshadowed by nearby urban centres. I would hate to see this fate repeated within the Niagara region, with decisions that would impact the unique and varied Pelham agricultural communities being made by those in large city centres who would not share the same appreciation as those who are actively growing and farming in Pelham.

The town is actively seeking ways to address the housing crisis. With over a 20-year history of streamlined approval processes between the town and the region, Pelham is positioned to continue to support housing growth. In 2023 alone, the town's population grew by 3.19%, and looking to the future, Pelham has currently approved more than 1,000 housing units of all types, including apartments, townhouses, condos, duplexes and single-family homes.

Once new residents move into these units, Pelham will grow by approximately 14%. We do not expect to slow

down this pace and are continuing to find gentle density options that allow for population growth without negative impacts to current residents. Our municipality must be able to continue to offer highly responsive personal local services to residents.

While Pelham has an incredible capacity to operate independently, as a town, we also recognize the benefits and balance that have to be achieved through co-operation with neighbouring municipalities. I'm proud to say that the collaborative efforts Pelham has participated in to reduce costs and increase government efficiency have been a great success.

I've been here since the day started, so I know that you have heard before about our shared facilities with the town of Lincoln. The Lincoln Pelham Public Library is a key example of how this collaboration relationship can be done successfully. By joining together, the two libraries were able to save \$130,000 in administrative services, and this money was poured back into front-line service and library materials, keeping the same costs for operation but providing a much-improved service level for residents.

Similarly, Pelham shares a town solicitor with the township of Wainfleet. This has reduced costs for both municipalities and improved institutional capacity.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal): Thirty seconds remaining.

Mr. Marvin Junkin: While neither of our municipalities where large enough to have a staff lawyer on its own, together we benefit from this collaboration.

Looking to the future, the towns of Pelham and Lincoln will share an environmental policy and climate change employee starting in 2024. Other negotiations on services are also in the works, but at this time cannot be disclosed.

If the government—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal): Thank you very much, Mayor Junkin. That concludes the time allocated to you.

I'd now like to call upon Chris McQueen. You may now begin your presentation.

Mr. Chris McQueen: My name is Chris McQueen. Although I'm currently the chief administrative officer for the town of Fort Erie, I am here today representing myself independently as a resident of Pelham, Ontario, with extensive history, more than 25 years, of municipal experience as a municipal politician in the city of Welland some 25-plus years ago. I was also in several senior leadership positions and chief administrative officer positions at municipalities in different levels of tiers and have also worked as a municipal consultant. So I've worked on the dark, darker and the darkest side, maybe, of municipal politics. Hopefully, you won't hold that against me.

I'm going through my presentation here. I hope it will scroll properly. I have provided some background on some of the work that I've done. I've come with an independent view about some of my perspective on municipal governance with having experience and work on service delivery reviews and other things at the region that generated well over \$25 million, so I come with some experience where I believe I may be helpful for this standing committee.

I think a responsible governance review, from my work in service delivery reviews, should be done using a reliable, comprehensive process: a business case, due diligence. Whether it's a municipal merger or a merger and acquisition of a corporate board or a service delivery review within a municipality, it follows a very comprehensive process that would focus on those things. I'm here just to encourage you to follow a good process and maybe be clear about what the vision is on this review as we go forward so that people in positions such as mine may be able to help inform that.

We've heard a lot of information about data and information. A lot of my presentation has been stated already, so I will fast-track past it in the interests of time, but I'm happy to come back and answer questions. I'm going to focus on some things that have guided the work I've done with service delivery reviews which I think are important.

A sample of establishing good guiding principles up front in the process and then setting up expected measures to those, I think, is important to demonstrate not just to residents and taxpayers but also to the municipalities, where those expected outcomes can be evaluated and understood before the process or decision is made. I've got a sample of things around—the ones that are darker here are just standard guiding principles that should come with expected measures if you're going to evaluate different options for governance. The two I'm going to focus on I think are two that you may have not heard anything about today. One is tax system stability, and the other is funding-source sustainability.

When I talk about tax system stability, the impact of governance changes and the respective tax systems needs to be carefully studied and considered. The current value reassessment is going to create substantial volatility in the tax system already, which we experienced in 2016. Municipalities need tax tools to manage this. If you layer on governance changes to that, carefully study the impact, because slight changes make extreme changes in the taxes of who is paying them, between tax classes, between municipalities and between residents in the same tax class. The impact has largely been, historically, on residential. It's a word of caution as you move forward with the review and recommendations you put forward.

Secondly is funding-source sustainability. It's imperative that programs be aligned with sustainable, stable funding, regardless of the type of service that's there. Municipalities have onboarded substantial health and social services over the last few decades since the downloading. These are driving property tax costs up. High property taxes make for unaffordable housing, and so I would ask the government to carefully consider what the impact has been of those downloaded services that have been funded on the municipal tax bill. We've had health care with local shares on our local tax bill. We've had physician recruitment, EMS, social housing; the whole list is there. We have high property taxes, and if you break them down by programs that have not traditionally been funded on the property tax bill, they're quite substantial and they've outpaced, in many cases, inflation.

The municipal regional governance review should not be limited to regional and municipal governments. I would suggest that they also include the provincial level. On the heels of my comments, there are many, many services that are health and social services that have never traditionally been funded on the municipal property tax bill. So as you go through the evaluation, as you do a business case, as you look at the outcomes that you expect, I think these are important decisions that should be visited and maybe revisited as you look at governance review.

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The uploading of those social service costs does not mean that those services can't be delivered locally, and in some cases, it makes sense to continue to deliver them locally but fund them at a different level of government.

We need certainty and focus, and I think there's been a lot of comments about this today—about what the intent of the governance review is and whether it's about housing or whether it's about governance and amalgamation. The uncertainty—and I've been in this since the 1999 Berkeley report, as a municipal employee and as a politician. It creates uncertainty, it creates short-term decision-making and it creates poor practices and loss of talent, and I've seen this in the last two and a half decades I've worked in this sector.

People are exhausting reserve funds. They're increasing debt and borrowing. They're deferring asset maintenance—a whole list of things. It's creating protectionism. It's creating parochialism. We need to work together, and we're willing to work together. I'm willing to work with 12 other CAOs in Niagara, which we have been doing on a number of issues, to look at that. But the uncertainty of governance is creating poor decision-making, not just at a political level, but an administrative level as well. Top talent is seeking new opportunities. So, the longer there is uncertainty, the more top talent the municipal sector will lose, and it's been happening, particularly more recently.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal): Thirty seconds remaining.

Mr. Chris McQueen: Municipalities are funding affordable housing costs on the property tax bill. Underfunded DCs, infrastructure for residential development, CIP plans, affordable housing grants—these are all things that, again, are supporting housing, but they're on the property tax bill. So we just need to be mindful of that, and they are substantial.

Building homes faster—we need tools. The legislation needs to give municipalities tools to enable housing, not limit our ability to encourage housing.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal): Thank you very much, sir. The presentation time is now concluded.

I would like to begin questions. We will start with the official opposition. MPP Jeff Burch.

Mr. Jeff Burch: Thank you to all of you for your presentations. We've had some great, thoughtful presentations today. It's very much appreciated by everyone on our committee.

I want to start with Bruce. Bruce, you and I have been working on various things throughout the years, from canal designation to governance. We were on a committee—I don't know; I think, 2013—in St. Catharines with a bunch of folks, looking at a lot of these very same options. This has been going on for a long, long time, but I want to focus on your three proposals, which we've heard before.

The elected chair—I wanted to ask you, because that actually was a decision that most people in Niagara, I thought, agreed with. We were going down that road of having an elected chair, then the provincial government stepped in, along with some other municipalities, and I think more for political than practical reasons, decided to reverse that when the election had already started. Would it be your position that really, locally, that's a decision that we should be able to decide, whether we elect our regional chair or not?

Mr. Bruce Timms: We had that discussion, we talked about a referendum even, like Durham did to establish that the regional chair should be elected at large. It should be a local decision, but the opportunity to make the change for 2024 lies with this committee, I think, and it is a decision this committee—I implore you, if there's nothing else that you do, the very least this committee should do is give the region an elected chair at large by the general public. It's something we can do and will not slow down any existing plans for building housing, because the work's already been done once. We were almost there; it's simply an effort from the clerk's office to elect the regional chair at large.

Mr. Jeff Burch: What would you say to the critique that it's such a large area and it requires so much money to be able to run, that it would give an advantage to candidates that were supported by large business interests and large donors?

Mr. Bruce Timms: The general public has the broad vote. It's far more effective and—number one, we're not much bigger than Durham or Halton, and Kitchener-Waterloo, the region of Waterloo. They, all three, elect their chairs at large and that is not an encumbrance. I think Niagara measures up to any one of those three regions and we're certainly capable of doing it.

The concern of influence? Well, my concern is more about the influence of how the regional chair is selected now by 17 of the newly elected council. So, yes, in broad terms, like any election of any office, there is a broad appeal to the general public, and how that's influenced and who gets elected is the same as any MP or any mayor today.

Mr. Jeff Burch: Thank you. Just before I move on to a question for someone else, you referred to voluntary local mergers. Were you referring to more utilities, or making sure that mergers of municipalities were voluntary and not forced?

Mr. Bruce Timms: Yes, voluntary, not forced. We've heard that Lincoln, West Lincoln and Grimsby are talking. I would say, the work of this committee and the impetus

and inspiration of this whole process has been very encouraging for some local voluntary mergers. They are probably the most effective, compared to forced mergers.

Mr. Jeff Burch: Thank you for that.

I just want to move on to Chris. Thanks for your presentation. I really liked the approach of “make sure you have a business case; do due diligence,” that we’re clear about the vision of that. I’m not sure this process so far lends itself to that. It’s one day and mostly—as has been pointed out—politicians talking.

But from your point of view on the administrative side, you must have been doing a face-palm when you saw what was going on in Peel and the massive exodus of employees that was happening and the lack of knowing what was going to happen or research into the huge task of dissolving a region and the need to pull back on that so quickly because of what was happening there.

Could you talk about your comment on how uncertainty about change that’s not properly thought out—its effects on local decision-making and retention of talent?

Mr. Chris McQueen: Sure. The comments that I made, really, are around the uncertainty of the existence of some of the governance structures that we work in. Municipalities that think they may be amalgamated with a larger centre are looking to strip their reserves and get lots of infrastructure built so that their local money that they’ve spent a lot of time and energy to reserve doesn’t get stripped out. They may choose to borrow for assets that are not good assets to be borrowing in order to acquire in a short period of time. So you go through a whole list of things. People start to get very parochial about their own municipal administration.

It doesn’t incent shared services discussions; it doesn’t incent working together and collaboration. It creates a protectionism effect, which happens politically, and I’ll tell you, administratively it happens, as well. That does, to some extent, limit it.

The certainty of knowing what’s happening would help administratively, from my perspective, in how I can help in this process, how I can inform the process, how I can inform a business case or expected outcomes in a process like this. I think it’s important for me as a resident, it’s important for me as a municipal administrator, and it’s important for me in dealing with the local councils that I deal with and many of my provincial colleagues here, which we have good collaborative relationships with.

I do think the certainty of things will help to provide better, clear focus and the ability for us to determine how, as an administrator, I can assist with processes for finding efficiencies for residents.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal): Thirty seconds remaining.

Mr. Jeff Burch: Thanks. We don’t have much time left, but, Marv, maybe we can talk a little later. I’ve heard in some of the other municipalities the concern about the preservation of agricultural lands when you have amalgamations and folks in urban settings not being so sensitive to the concerns of rural settings. So maybe we can touch on that later, but I don’t have time right now.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal): Thank you very much, MPP Burch.

We’ll now move to our independent member. MPP McMahon.

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: I have a bit of a shorter time, so I’ll have to get you to be succinct.

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We’ll start with Bruce. Thank you for your presentation. You do have a doppelgänger in Arthur Potts; I think people would agree with that.

Did you want to add and finish your presentation at all?

Mr. Bruce Timms: Yes, just further on the notion of the double-duty model, it is something that the region of Niagara has looked at a number of times. We got to the point where the city of St. Catharines fought for the opportunity to do it. The region said yes, the province said yes, and then the city said—well, they backed off. But more recently, as of 2020, the city of Niagara Falls unanimously voted in favour of and approached the region to do the double-duty model for Niagara Falls.

The main point of that double-duty goes to what Mayor Siscoe had said earlier about the disconnect between the local council and Niagara region. Unlike Durham, for example, no city councillor sits at the region; vice versa, no regional councillor has a say or a seat at the local council.

Mrs. Jennifer (Jennie) Stevens: The mayor.

Mr. Bruce Timms: Member Stevens mentions the mayor does, but the mayor primarily is the mayor of the city. That’s why he’s elected: to represent his people, his city and their interest. So yes, he has a job at the region—I’ve seen mayors try for about a year and a half to bring a regional message to the city council or a city council message to the region, but very soon they abandon that issue and they look after their city at the city and at the region.

So the disconnect between services the region offers and what the city does is because nobody sits at both tables, whereas at Durham, Halton and York, they do.

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: Right. Thank you.

The voluntary local mergers: You mentioned one group of communities, but, to your knowledge, have you heard of anyone else or any other municipalities interested in looking at that right now? Or do you just think that we should just let it play out as we do this review?

Mr. Bruce Timms: Well, I think you make the two changes I suggest, and then those city councillors are all sitting around the regional table and they start to see the advantages of local mergers. You saw that from the three: Lincoln, West Lincoln and Grimsby. We’re talking in that direction. I think there are other opportunities, but they’ve been reported in the paper as discussing that strategy.

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: Okay, thank you very much. Thanks for sharing all your knowledge and experience.

All presentations were fantastic, by the way.

Now, Chris, you had a lot in that presentation—whoa. You were talking about municipal tools for housing. Did you have any specific ones?

Mr. Chris McQueen: Yes. Thank you for the question. I think the provision of things like inclusionary zoning would be helpful outside of those areas exclusively where GO stations are. I think it allows municipalities to have a little bit more guidance and direction to developments and new developments that are coming forward to allow a housing mix, particularly a housing mix that provides affordable and attainable housing for our communities.

Those are the types of tools that would be helpful, and allowing us to collect DCs to fully fund housing development because the exemptions leave a shortfall in the DCs—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal): Thirty seconds remaining.

Mr. Chris McQueen:—that ends up on the property tax bill. I would say the housing mix targets would be most helpful. They would allow developers to balance the developments in a community to allow a mix of affordable right up to some premium development that somebody may have to pay a premium to build.

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: Great, thanks. That's all I have.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal): Thank you, MPP McMahon.

We'll now move over to the government side with MPP Lorne Coe.

Mr. Lorne Coe: Thank you, Chair, and through you to Bruce: Thanks for all of your presentations; they were excellent. But, Bruce, I want to continue along the lines of talking a bit about the two-system government here in the region of Niagara. In your opinion, is it supporting the construction of new homes and the provision of effective local governance more generally. How well is that happening?

Mr. Bruce Timms: As you've heard from many mayors, there are many homes ready to be built, but there is a gap in the level of co-operation between the city and the region because, from the political side, the political will is lost, or the political connection is lost between the region and the local city council. So I think we could improve our model tremendously by having city councillors sit at the region. You don't need a region-only councillor who has no seat, no say, no vote at the city level. The two policies, the two efforts, could coordinate or collaborate much better without a great disruption, only a better connection between the city councillors and the regional councillors, so that the political will becomes more of a team effort; the region becomes a team of 12 municipalities, not so much a separate tier.

Mr. Lorne Coe: In your opinion, that particular approach would support the construction of new homes?

Mr. Bruce Timms: I think it would improve the processes tremendously.

Mr. Lorne Coe: Thank you for your answer.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal): MPP Oosterhoff.

Mr. Sam Oosterhoff: My thanks to all three of you for coming here. I know some of you have been here all day, so I appreciate the fact that you've been able to sit through a lot of different questions and a lot of different answers

and perhaps think a little bit about that as you approached here this afternoon.

I want to begin by putting a finer point on Mayor Junkin's presentation. I appreciated it. I know where you're coming from. I have to ask: Prior to serving in office, when you met someone, did you say you were from Fenwick or Fonthill?

Mr. Marvin Junkin: North Pelham.

Mr. Sam Oosterhoff: Right. I'm not trying to be coy, but the reality is—when I grew up, I was from Campden. Technically, my postal code was Vineland; I said I was from Campden. Now I tell people I was from Lincoln, because that's where both of those communities were located. I live in St. Anns, but no one knows where that is, so I say Smithville, but honestly, it's not Smithville because it's in West Lincoln.

The point that I'm trying to make is that there are a lot of communities that exist within areas that don't necessarily lose their sense of community. I would argue that North Pelham is no less Pelham just because it's not Fonthill, even if someone driving through Highway 20 might think that Fonthill is all that Pelham is, because if you're driving through, that's all you see. I think the same thing can happen when you have changes across the province and across our region. We went from, again, 26 down to 12, and we didn't lose who we were as communities here in Niagara.

I think you were clear with where you were coming from, but I want to just have it on the record: If you had to make a choice, would it be retaining the current model, moving towards a four-city model with service boards for regional things like police and utilities, or moving to a single-tier Niagara model?

Mr. Marvin Junkin: I will answer that question, but then you have to allow me to ask you a question.

Mr. Sam Oosterhoff: I can't do that just because of the thing—but I'll try.

Mr. Marvin Junkin: Okay. Things have to change. I think that with the increasing costs of everything, whether it be labour, building infrastructure—whatever we look at, everything is going up; it's not coming down. So I like the existing structure. It's the best that's available, I believe, but it will have to include a lot more co-operation between each of the municipalities. We don't all need to have planning departments. Bill 53 was a step in the right direction. And there's a lot more that we can do individually, talking to each municipality. Again, I like the idea of it being voluntary as opposed to mandated.

Going back to my farming experience, when you wanted to move a 1,500-pound Holstein, you could either get behind and push it or you could get in front of it with a little bit of hay and accomplish the same thing.

Mr. Sam Oosterhoff: I appreciate that analogy.

I'm going to ask the follow-up question to that to Bruce: Have you seen a voluntary amalgamation work over the past 20, 30 years in Ontario?

Mr. Bruce Timms: I have not looked into that. I did see a voluntary vote for regional chair elected at large.

Mr. Sam Oosterhoff: That wasn't my question specifically, but I'm wondering—because it's easy to say, "Oh, we should all have voluntary amalgamations," and everyone says, "Absolutely." I'm sure in 1970, if the province had come around and said, "What do you think about just leaving it to the 26 of you guys and the two counties and you can figure it out and have some voluntary ones?" they would have said, "Absolutely. That sounds great. We'll figure it out here." Realistically, that didn't happen, right?
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So my question, then, also going to Chris, would be with regard to the parochialism that you mentioned. You mentioned parochialism, and, bluntly, that's something I've seen a lot. There are exceptions to that rule on particular issues that people have been able to go to Queen's Park and have a unified voice on; those are not that common, and I see a lot of splits even between local municipalities fighting over turf within a municipality: "My ward; your ward."

I'm wondering how we can avoid that. How can we get rid of some of that parochialism? If people don't want to see some of those changes, if they're for the status quo, what would be the structure, then, that removes some of that parochialism, if not going towards fewer municipalities and some forced amalgamations?

The Acting Chair (Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal): One minute remaining.

Mr. Chris McQueen: I'll speak candidly: Parochialism for municipal administrators is much less marked than it is for municipal politicians, and I say that as a former politician and as a municipal administrator observing. I think you'll see much less, and it's part of what has come together with some of the west Niagara discussions. They have administrations that are working closely together without any sort of threat, and they're being encouraged to do that. That's the kind of thing that's going to reduce parochialism: some leadership guidance and clarity on focus. Assign work to the CAOs for meeting some objectives or targets that are put forward, and we will deliver on that.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal): Thank you very much. That concludes the time for the government members.

I'd now like to move on to our official opposition. MPP Wayne Gates.

Mr. Wayne Gates: I'd just like to comment on a Niagara business that actually talked a few minutes ago and talked about not rushing a process. There are so many examples. Peel region was rushed through, and the government had to back down on it because they didn't take a look at how much it was going to cost and the number of jobs and those types of things.

Then we saw it with the greenbelt, which was rushed through. They said we needed to build 1.5 million homes, and then we saw there that that wasn't accurate, and the government had to back down on that, because instead of taking the greenbelt across the province and talking to communities, whether it be in Pelham or just in Niagara—it never happened, but they had to back down on that. So I want to say that whatever they do, they should take their time.

To my good friend Bruce there: I've known you for a long, long time. I can agree with you that the chair of the region should be elected. I know there are some things around "How does somebody like myself raise enough money to run for that spot?" and that's debatable or whatever, but we had that in Niagara. This government decided to take that away from us. Niagara wanted it; the Conservatives took it away from us.

So my question to you is, do you think the decision by the Conservatives was wrong on taking our opportunity to elect a chair in Niagara?

Mr. Bruce Timms: I was up at an AMO conference and the question was asked, and I was very clear: My feeling is that the government was wrong to take that opportunity away from Niagara. Serving our regional council at that time, I knew how passionate and how interested the people in Niagara were in having an opportunity to elect their chair at large. So the answer is, the province should not have done that. We need to have a chair elected at large again. Please, if there's nothing else you do at this committee, make that recommendation.

Mr. Wayne Gates: The second part I'd add is that I've known you for 30 years maybe; that's the first time me and you have agreed on something, so I think that's pretty cool too.

Mr. Bruce Timms: Cheers to working together.

Mr. Wayne Gates: It doesn't happen all the time.

I'd like to talk to—oh, yes, sorry. I just want to make sure: Mr. Timms, you're incorrect in the assessment that the chair has strong-mayor powers—he does not—and brings a budget forward. That's not accurate, so you might want to check into that a little further.

To the mayor of Pelham—my daughter and my grandkids live in Pelham, by the way; you probably don't know that. One of the things that I agree with in your statement that you talked about is the importance of protecting agriculture. As you know, the dairy farmers do come to Queen's Park. They do have a lobby day, we have a breakfast that is provided, and it's so important. But we've seen in the province of Ontario that we're losing over 300 acres of prime farmland every single day in this province. Maybe you can talk and maybe convince some of my colleagues over there how important it is to protect our farmland and protect our agriculture, not only for Ontario and Canada but even for your community, as well.

Mr. Marvin Junkin: I appreciate the question. It's a big problem, and as far as I'm concerned, it does indeed go to the federal level, where we have this huge immigration—I don't care where anybody comes from, so it's not a racist statement, but we're bringing in hundreds of thousands of people a year, and nothing is planned. Why don't we have suitable houses for these people coming into our great country ahead of time? Instead, we're forcing them to live under overpasses, in parks, and there is no one who is living in a park, trying to find a meal, that can have time to go look for a job. So it's a big problem, which forces the province and then it comes down to the next level and forces the municipalities—where are we going to put these houses?

And I find it ironic that when I was sitting at the back of the room today—and I'm not going to name the municipalities, but they were in here talking about meeting housing needs, and they were taking farmland, and yet people were applauding the fact that they were meeting their housing goals. You can't have it both ways. We cannot be building 1.5 million houses in the next 10 years—you either have to go infilling, which I agree with entirely, or you've got farmland, or you've got green space. We don't have housing area. We have to make a housing area out of either farmland or green space or our natural heritage systems. So when I hear about having to build all these houses—and nobody wants to lose green space, no one wants to lose farmland—where are we putting them? Obviously the only answer is to stay within our urban boundaries and go up. The fact that we have floor limits—eight floors or 15—if we're having all these people coming in, we've got to start going up and putting these buildings next to public transportation and close to city centres so they have services.

The telling feature here is that, in 2022, 67,000 immigrants that came to this country went back home because they had more opportunity at home than they did in this country. That's ridiculous. That's all I can say. In that rant, I hope I answered your question.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal): One minute remaining.

Mr. Wayne Gates: Listen, it's your time, and you chose to passionately talk about what you think.

The reality is in this province we need to build homes. We need to build 1.5 million homes. Everybody on this side agrees with that. What we don't need to do, quite frankly—we know there's enough land in the province of Ontario to build two million homes right here in Ontario—and we shouldn't be touching our agriculture lands, our farmlands. We need to protect our food source. That's what we should be discussing here.

We have a housing crisis. We have an affordability crisis. We can't get proper health care because of some of the bills that have been brought in—Bill 124. What we need to do when we get together like this is find solutions so it's better for all the municipalities in Niagara, it's better for Ontario, it's better for our country. That's what we have to do.

When you're passionate about something, you never have to apologize. You're talking from your heart, and we all have to respect that. But as far as I'm concerned, we can do a lot better of a job on building homes. That's what this committee should be about, and I believe that's what the Minister of Housing wants it to be about as well. So thank you very much for your passion. I think my time's up.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal): Thank you, MPP Gates. That concludes your time.

I'd like to now pass it over to the independent member. MPP McMahon.

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: Well, if the mood is ranting, I'm there with you right now. Farmers feed cities, so thank you for all you do and your community does.

Pelham sounds beautiful. I've never been, so I might need to look you up for a tour. What's the population?

Mr. Marvin Junkin: It's 18,000.

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: All right. I'm with you 100%—200%—that we can build this housing in the urban centres especially. I represent beautiful Beaches—East York in Toronto. We have a main avenue there with a subway corridor underneath, Danforth Avenue—two storeys, four storeys at most, but mostly two storeys. That should be eight to 10 to 12. Come on, this is 2024 now, and we need to be bold and brave and build up our avenues. We shouldn't have surface parking; we should be building parking that can go underneath. We should not have that in a city like Toronto. We should be looking at provincial lands. We point the finger for everyone else to build, but are we looking in our own backyards? Are we looking at our lands? No. We can do as-of-right, eight to 10 storeys, and be done with it in Toronto alone. But that's a whole other conversation.

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So I'm with you: We need to preserve our farmland, and I will help do everything I can to do that.

What I was really excited about in what you said, Marvin, was that as part of your shared arrangement, you are hiring—and maybe I should apply—for the climate change employee in 2024. Can you tell me about that? I think that's fascinating, and I have not heard that from anyone else.

Mr. Marvin Junkin: In the town just this year, on this council, we've selected citizens to—we have a climate committee that will look at any project we take on within the town. This person, who we will be sharing with Lincoln, will be overseeing any of our projects that we are contemplating, making sure that we build them as green as possible and that they're sustainable.

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: Wow. A municipality of 18,000 people is forward-thinking and realizing that we're in a climate emergency and acting on it. That is fantastic. That's a lesson to all of us here, for sure.

Back to Chris, because we got cut off a little bit: Do you feel the intentions of this regional review are clear?

Mr. Chris McQueen: I think there are two clear objectives. One is the two-tier level of government enabling houses to be built—I think was one of the questions to be answered. And the second one was, are there regional governance changes that would enable better government or more efficient government? That's my understanding of the two. The emphasis initially appeared to be more on building homes faster, but I do think the discussion, the clarity has shifted more towards some discussion around regional governments, from my perspective.

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: Do you have faith that once we've done this whole exercise in many municipalities across Ontario and we come up with a committee report of sorts, we're actually going to start something and not reverse it; we're just going to commit and actually follow something through?

Mr. Chris McQueen: I'm hopeful that for residents of municipalities and residents of Ontario we collectively will find some efficiencies in streamlining, because I do agree with the fact that the status quo is not an option.

Municipalities have evolved over the last 25 years, and we need to continue to evolve, and part of that is finding new ways of doing business and efficiencies.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal): Thirty seconds remaining.

Mr. Chris McQueen: I think there are some suggestions that came out today that I think are worth pursuing, and I think there is—

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: And what's your top piece of advice for us?

Mr. Chris McQueen: There is duplication that resides at the provincial level and some of the legislation, with duplicate positions like CDOs and planning positions and others. We need to clear the planning legislation, enact it—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal): Thank you very much, sir. That concludes our time for today.

We'll move to the government members. MPP Matthew Rae.

Mr. Matthew Rae: Thank you to the presenters.

I just want to, for everyone in the room who's still here and for the members who will be coming back to Niagara—this is not a one-day thing, as the motion we passed earlier. I know some people are subbing in on the committee today. But the committee did pass the motion earlier that we visit each region a minimum of two times, so we will be coming back to Niagara in the future.

My question will be to Mayor Junkin. As a dairy farmer's kid—

Mr. Marvin Junkin: Congratulations.

Interjection.

Mr. Matthew Rae: No relation—not that I know of, sir.

I 100% agree with your analogy about getting a heifer in the barn; it's easier with straw, versus from behind.

There is not as much growth in Pelham as we see in, obviously, the two cities and the other regions of Niagara, because it's more rural.

I represent a very rural riding, Perth–Wellington. I was just wondering—and I know you mentioned your limited experience, compared to some other presenters today, in municipal politics—what are two items, provincially or municipally, that could change to help you get more homes built in some of your smaller communities? And on-farm housing, I know, is important for some workers.

Mr. Marvin Junkin: Again, I know you've had this mentioned before: The OLT has to have timelines on their decisions. At the regional level, I know we had one application that came to council—they didn't agree with the staff recommendation; it came to council. The council, the elected officials, agreed with the applicant, and then other people in the community decided to take it to the OLT, and that decision is at least six months from where it was first introduced to them. There's really no reason for that. It would be nice if that could be 30 days or 60 days that they have to make a decision. I think that would be a great thing.

The other thing, and this is something that kind of ties into your question—and this came out when we were deciding transit—is whether we were going to raise fares

or not. Again, that is one great thing that the region brought together again. The region is functioning very well. It's a cohesive unit. As a member of Pelham, when I sit on that regional board, I take my Pelham hat off and I make decisions that will benefit all of the region. My point is, it came out during the discussion on transit that the average income in Niagara region is \$58,000. The average income in Waterloo region is \$114,000.

It's one thing to be talking about building houses, but what we need in this region—and we do have a department at the region, Niagara Economic Development, that is bringing jobs, with the help of the provincial government and local municipalities. But this department at the region, Niagara regional economic, they are bringing in lots of jobs and providing our residents with economic opportunity to improve their incomes so that they can afford these houses. I just wanted to mention that: the fact that that is one great thing that the region is doing. They look at the whole region, and when we get a request from a business that is looking for somewhere to build, they come to us and they'll say, "Well, this is available and this is available there," and then you do a great job of bringing in business to the region, which is what this area needs.

Other than the OLT's shorter timelines, I think that planning that was brought in because of that Bill 53 is going to help things immensely, bringing it down to a local level, but there are other things that I feel should be handled at the higher level, whether it be police, housing, health or something as mundane as garbage collection. The region does that on the whole picture, and I gladly give them the job of looking after that. I honestly think that the region is doing a fine job looking after the citizens of the region. Thank you.

Mr. Matthew Rae: Thank you, Your Worship. I just also want to state for the record that Ontario currently exports \$23 billion in food every year.

And coming from a farm—I know we have another farm kid on this side of the aisle here today—I saw an interesting stat recently from the International Seed Federation, which is a global organization. Today's farmers feed at least 10 times more people using the same amount of land we had 100 years ago. So it's a credit to yourself sir, and obviously to my father and my family, in that aspect.

I will now defer my time to MPP Oosterhoff, Chair.

Mr. Sam Oosterhoff: Thank you very much, MPP Rae.

I appreciate all the feedback. Chris, I want to ask very quickly—because we've heard from local municipal leaders about the challenges around staffing and the retention of staff. When we have 13 municipalities—I was looking at your own career. It's a bit of a revolving door. I don't mean to be rude, but let's be honest, you've moved around. That's pretty common in the municipal space. When you have 13 local municipalities all recruiting from each other, competing with each other, do you find that leads to high staff turnover?

It's something I've heard about from the business community, concerns around, "Every time I turn around, there's a new building officer I don't know. Every time I turn

around, the inspector moved to another municipality down the road” because, whatever—\$2 an hour more or whatever it is. And I’m wondering, from an efficiency perspective, to have people who are trained up, who are able to do the work that needs to be done, if you had fewer positions—perhaps not in the sense of overall, but fewer positions, amongst each of the municipalities shared—to the point of the mayor of Pelham—would that change any of that? Would you see an ability for people to recruit and retain staff better?

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The Acting Chair (Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal): Thirty seconds remaining.

Mr. Chris McQueen: I think the two biggest drivers were the uncertainty around the pandemic, where there was remote working, so people had new work opportunities; it created a lot of shift in the labour force. And I think the second one is, there is competition between municipalities not just in Niagara, but outside Niagara, a lot because of remote working opportunities, so people are able to work farther away from home and have the same work-life balance. So that is ongoing.

The planning one is one that could be fixed sooner rather than later because we are competing for talent regionally because we’re not clear which authorities we have and don’t have. There have been suggestions today about how enacting the legislation to move that forward would be helpful to provide a limited number of those resources—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal): Thank you very much. That concludes your time for today.

I’d like to thank all the members for coming and joining this committee and thank you to all three of you for your presentations today and your insight into this particular matter.

MR. AVI HOOPER

MR. ALLEN MCKAY

MR. ARAS REISIARDEKANI

The Acting Chair (Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal): I’d like to now invite our next guests to come up and join us and please take a seat.

Ladies and gentlemen, if we can get started with our next presentation. We have Avi Hooper, Allen McKay and Aras Reisi, and we’ll be starting with Mr. Avi Hooper. Please state your name for Hansard, and you may begin.

Mr. Avi Hooper: My name is Avi Hooper. I’m a local taxpayer here in St. Catharines and, just by way of background, I have a background in economics and financial management. So some of my comments are economic-focused, just to give you some context.

I want to focus on five key areas that I feel are most important to the discussion today, both on housing and overall administration of the 12 municipalities currently.

I want to start off with, we need to be a single-tiered city. Hamilton has clearly been successful over the past two decades in amalgamating, with, I understand, just

under a 500,000 population today but growing. That is, I believe, the appropriate number of population for a single-tiered city.

The reason I say that is we need to look at our population in—while, on the one hand, our economy is growing faster than the province on average, when you look at the population growth, unfortunately, our working-age population is in decline. Our population is getting older. What that means is that our costs are going to continue to rise while our revenues are going to continue to fall. A tax revenue maximization strategy can only be accomplished with one leadership team across both the electorate and the administration.

There are clear disparities across the 12 municipalities which seem completely unnecessary. The best way visually to see this is a very positive correlation between vibrant town centres and successful housing policies. These disparities exist within the Niagara region. Co-operation can only happen if we are one community. I don’t know about you, but I didn’t see enough co-operation amongst our leaders today during deliberations.

Secondly, a decision-making framework: Our challenge with affordable housing and with homelessness needs a centralized decision-making approach. We need to reduce this competition for what are limited resources. We need to avoid bottlenecks. It would seem pretty clear that a lot of our challenges with regard to housing development are being hampered by inconsistent policies. Again, just looking at today, there’s confusion as to why the shovels aren’t finding the ground despite the so-called high level and meeting targets of permits in housing today. Why should there be this confusion? Having one team manage and focus and lead us in housing development is the only way forward. I would also add that I would like to see a zero-based budgeting approach within municipal governments. We need to re-evaluate our existing contracts thoroughly.

Thirdly, diversity, equity and inclusion: This is preached but not practised. Only 18% of Niagara’s population is foreign-born. This is way below both Ontario and Canada as a whole. What this means is this is putting tremendous pressure because we are losing out on the supply of labour, and I would highlight that in the building and construction sectors, not attracting this young talent from around the world is a hindrance to our success. I would also add that this cohort of 18% is not represented in government locally. My solution/suggestion would be to introduce term limits. Let’s bring down those walls. Let’s get some younger, broader representation in government today.

Fourth, inflation: We are not recognizing the inflationary pressures that we are set to face in the future. The last 20 years are not going to look the same as the next 20. The last 20 years of globalization, of disinflation and even deflation, I believe, are going to see wage inflation—which, by the way, is a bigger contributor to the cost not just in construction for new homes but for the government as a whole, much greater than raw material. Raw material prices have actually been in decline. Wages, I believe, are

going to rise by 4% per year. This assumption is not embedded in any budgets that I'm reading, and I don't understand why, because the most material cost and expenditure is coming from wages. A single-tier entity has more cost controls, potentially saving us money. Above all, revenues, nominally, are going to continue to rise with this pace of inflation just to stand still. Instead, today, I see reserves being used to finance operating gaps.

That leaves me with the last very important key point: productivity. The Canadian economy is as bad as the old populations of Italy and Japan when it comes to productivity growth. So you can imagine a region like Niagara is very unproductive. The only way to improve productivity is through investment. Today, that investment has to come in the form of technology. All the artificial intelligence is real. This is going to save us money, but more importantly, this is going to grow our economy. Productivity growth leads to economic growth, which is tax revenue growth. But, above all, it suppresses these structural inflationary pressures that I am expecting.

Tourism: This is one sector that we excel at locally—highly productive, highly value-added. Tourism, as we know, and as, in fact, my last slide really highlights—many of you may not even be aware that Niagara Falls, when you look at Google Analytics, is the second-most googled tourist destination globally, behind the Maldives.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal): One minute remaining.

Mr. Avi Hooper: Our tourism opportunity needs to expand far beyond Niagara Falls, Niagara-on-the-Lake. We need to come together as one, whether it's the wine industry, beer, just experiences, our shipbuilding and just the amount of goods floating up the Welland Canal. Economic growth equals tax revenue growth.

Thank you very much.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal): Thank you very much, Mr. Hooper, for your presentation.

We'd now like to invite Mr. Allen McKay. You may now start your presentation. Please state your name for Hansard purposes.

Mr. Allen McKay: Good afternoon, everybody. My name is Allen McKay. I've been a resident here in the Niagara region for over 35 years. I spent 22 years working at the Niagara region—many roles when I was working there; mainly, near the end, I was in financial management. I'm here today to speak in favour of an amalgamated Niagara, one Niagara.

One hundred and twenty-six politicians: More concerning than the number of politicians is this governance structure supports a duplication in the administration of government services here in Niagara, which is costing local taxpayers millions of dollars more than it should. Niagara doesn't need 13 chief administrative officers. We don't need 13 finance departments. We don't need 13 planning departments or 11 fire services or two fire dispatch services, which—I've been racking my brain for years as to why we have two fire dispatch services here in the Niagara region.

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In 2020, Niagara spent \$2.6 million on CAO salaries, whereas Hamilton spent \$275,000. Niagara spent \$1.5 million on fire chiefs, whereas the city of Hamilton spent \$196,000. This represents two examples where annualized savings can be realized with governance changes. There are many, many more savings opportunities. Some have estimated that these savings could generate as much as \$25 million a year in savings.

In addition to the savings, you'll also realize operational efficiencies with one Niagara.

Marvin Ryder was the transition head for the city of Hamilton merger. In a St. Catharines Standard interview, he said he was the chair of the board that identified more than \$25 million in operational savings and developed a plan to reduce industrial and commercial property taxes by 5%. In addition to that, Ryder claimed victory over the elimination of numerous inefficiencies that took place prior to the amalgamation of Hamilton.

The current governance structure does not work for local politicians, and you've heard that today. You've heard a number of politicians say the status quo is just not going to work. What we find is that many local politicians are more concerned with their lower-tier municipality and will make decisions that will benefit the lower-tier municipality, even if it has a negative impact on the upper tier.

When I discuss the issue of governance reform with local politicians, the response I get is, "Municipalities are products of the province, and there's nothing we can do." When I discuss the issue with my MPP, the response I get is, "We continue to support local municipalities by providing the tools and flexibility they need," but then I'm encouraged to go speak with my local representatives. You can appreciate why someone like myself would be frustrated by all of that, feeling as though I'm being held hostage.

Some people are concerned that if we go to a one-city model, we'll lose our voice or identity. Many in St. Catharines will remember when St. Catharines was split up into wards. Even today, we still identify with those ward areas, like Port Dalhousie and Merritton. It will be no different with a one-city model. Port Colborne will still be Port Colborne. West Lincoln will still be West Lincoln. In Hamilton, Dundas is still Dundas; Ancaster is still Ancaster. Pembroke is still Pembroke.

Shared services: Some say to leave the structure alone—the status quo—and what we'll do is, we'll develop all these shared-services agreements. Shared services will do little to address the structural issues that we have within the region. You'll still have 13 chief administrative officers. You'll still have 11 fire departments. Shared services will do little to reduce the number of politicians and will only serve to reinforce a bloated duplication in the way we administer our government services.

Dual-duty councillors: Some say that dual-duty councillors is the answer to all our concerns. We have dual-duty councillors now. They're called mayors. Despite having these people at both the upper- and lower-tier tables, politicians still continue to work in silos and still

continue to point fingers at the upper tier when providing explanations as to why my property taxes continue to go up. Although this will reduce the number of people involved in municipal politics, it will do little to address the duplication in the way we administer government services.

A three- or four-city model: Moving from 12 lower-tier municipalities and an upper tier to four cities does not go far enough and will not generate the savings that have been projected. In addition, the very reason the province reversed its decision with the region of Peel dissolution was due to costs. If you're going to dissolve the region of Niagara, you need to figure out how regional services are going to be delivered. Services such as public health and EMS would now be run by four separate cities instead of one region. Any cost savings generated by the reduction to four cities would certainly get used up in the administration of these regionally run services.

I acknowledge that many of the delegates speaking today are in favour of a three- or four-city model. I also know that many of the delegates are active local politicians and senior staff with various cities, with vested interests in the outcome and recommendations from this committee. Pardon my analogy, but it's like inviting the turkey to help plan the Christmas dinner. Let's hope that this committee can see past city biases or any potential conflicts of interest when you're coming up with your recommendations.

Some say amalgamation is proven to cost taxpayers more money in the long run. Marvin Ryder noted that in the city of Hamilton amalgamation, their board identified \$25 million in operational savings. They also reduced industrial and commercial property taxes by 5%.

Some may point to the recent amalgamation of transit services. At that time, St. Catharines saw the highest-ever property tax increase in history. Some would say this is an example of an amalgamation costing more. I would say the reason for that record tax increase was local councils making the decision to hire 47 brand new staff and dumping millions of dollars into reserves, instead of returning those savings to the taxpayer.

If your goal is to build more houses, then we should be focused on reducing the cumbersome administration it takes to get housing built. Here in Niagara, we currently have two levels of planning, with the upper tier and lower tier, where proposals need to be checked. This can be time-consuming and frustrating for builders. Amalgamation will address that issue.

Before we start charging residents more to live in Niagara, we need to start by using the property taxes that are currently being collected in a more effective manner. Niagara has 12 separate, lower-tier municipalities and an upper-tier municipality. We waste millions upon millions of dollars each year administering our government services here in Niagara. We need a paradigm shift in the way that we look at governance here in Niagara. Niagara needs to eliminate this duplication, amalgamate to one city—generating millions of dollars for the taxpayer. I thank you for your time.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal):

Thank you very much for your presentation.

I would like to now invite Aras Reisi to begin your presentation. Please state your name for the Hansard record. Thank you.

Mr. Aras Reisiardekani: Good afternoon. My name is Aras Reisiardekani. I used to live in York region, I lived in the hustle and bustle of Toronto for 10 years, and I've been living in Niagara region for a couple of years. It took us a journey of two years to settle on which community in Niagara Falls we wanted to live in because there are two set municipalities with completely different rules.

I'm an active community member. I have a team at university called Team Lab Coat. We mentor about 100 youth or students. Our signature event is a fundraiser for North York General Hospital.

I want to thank the government for building us a new hospital. Over at my team, Team Lab Coat, Niagara branch—we are starting to do the fundraising for a Niagara hospital as well. As a result of working with youth, my experiences represent the perspective of that youth—millennials and #GenZ. I've been participating in city council in person, every single meeting, which is a great opportunity to get involved and get to know your representatives. Out of that I was able to actually have a direct conversation with them and impact municipal affairs. Yet, I've never been to the regional council. That's food for thought.

I want to talk about the divorce proceedings of Peel region. They've been growing together, but they're miserable. They want to get a divorce, but they've been together for too long. They have a mortgage together and now they cannot go their separate ways. Now, they have to stay together.

In Niagara region, we are 12 united couples that are trying to work together. It is best we start before we become too interdependent and we cannot do anything about it.

As many have said, the problem is we have far too many cooks in the kitchen—126 politicians. I have a simple question, and I ask you to please bring it to Queen's Park. In Niagara region, either we have far too many local politicians, or we don't have enough of what they call MPPs. Either cut down the 126—because there's only 124 in Queen's Park—or give us more than four MPPs locally. It's got to be either one. It has to be one of them.

Blame game and finger-pointing—I've sat in council meetings, where I go in person. Local politicians blame it on the region and the region blames it on the locals, and citizens are totally confused.

It's not just about a blame game. There are areas that overlap, create confusion, and even for the issues that are completely separate, far too many times, I've heard, "Oh, we cannot do this because we have to wait for the region."

When we are talking about development, I vividly remember the face of a young couple—very sad—they bought the dream land, they saved to build, and now they've been told, "Well, we don't know. You have got to go to the region because it's not really"—and, at the end, council said, "We're going to pass a motion. We said that

we support it. Go deal with the region, because we honestly can't do anything for you."

I remember the face of a young father and his son—the same quagmire. They've been told, "We can't do much about it. You got to go talk to the region."

So what's the solution? One-tier governance.

The other problem that we have, as has been echoed by the other honourable speakers, is we have too many sunshine bureaucrats. If you're a poor, low-income region, you have been asked by our own politicians—not all of them—that we got to sponsor all of this: too much bureaucracy. To give you an example, it has been said that amalgamation does not create a cost saving; maybe it's not saving accounting savings, but it would generate economic value generation.

As others said, "Every municipality wants to do their own little thing. We have 12 CAOs, 12 chief executive officers, 12 everything, except some positions that some municipalities are too poor to be able to hire." Think about this: Instead of 13 jack-of-all-trade chief engineering officers, what could we do? Four cities, four chief engineering officers, then hire the remaining nine engineers as highly specialized engineers with a highly specialized set of skills to do highly specialized tasks for each of those major cities. This is the example of saving money by bringing specialized—not the jack-of-all-trades that we are doing currently.

I'm in favour of one centralized government. One of my students, Andre, he told me, "I want to become a carpenter." When Andre graduates, I want him to be able to go to one physical building to get every single building permit, every single development criteria to be done in one physical building, as opposed to passing people, bouncing people to the region, to local, to the region—just because politicians want to save their position.

To be fair, I've identified two areas. First, if you look at the map, we have the municipalities that are highly rural, such as West Lincoln, Pelham, Lincoln, Grimsby and Wainfleet. Again, I was trying to buy a property; I've gone through every single one over the course of two years—the real estate agent was my aunt; that's why. So keep those rural regions as one separate city, and then let the remaining big urban regions absorb them.

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When you look at the numbers, you end up with four cities of roughly 100,000 people, and it would be great, because those smaller rural regions would be having one rural region. The farming region would not be dictated by the rules of big-city people like myself. They would have 100,000 people in West Lincoln, and then with the other municipalities, we could engage in economic scale. The shared resources certainly could be handled by, instead of a subcommittee of politicians in the region, the professionals at the board level.

But my most important slide is this one. I appreciate every single one of you running for office. I appreciate the entirety of those who volunteer their time for us as our representatives. But let me be honest, and I hope that as you go across Ontario, you remember this: No one will

vote to eliminate their job. Those in danger of losing their job will embark on a campaign of fearmongering: "This will be the end of an era." They've done it at every single amalgamation. We've seen it today, to a certain extent.

My humble solution: Announce the funds and say every single bureaucrat and every single politician—I know I'm not going to be popular, but every single politician who loses money, give them compensation. That will help. And be brave; don't be afraid.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal): One minute remaining.

Mr. Aras Reisiardekani: Let me put it this way: We are a low-income region. The majority of the people here cannot come up with a \$200 emergency fund. Yes, they've been asked by many of those in positions of power that, no, we need more politicians. If you ask people, they would tell you no, we don't need them.

Evolution, not revolution: The only constant is the change, and the change is the only constant. We need to transition. Twelve municipalities was great, and even when it happened, there were a lot of people who didn't want that kind of thing; they wanted to stay in the good old days. It's time to transition to four cities with shared resources, and I propose that every 15 to 20 years, perhaps there needs to be an automatic review process, that we're reviewing how things are going and adjusting as we are going.

I want to thank you for your time, on behalf of myself and my students, and while we're at it, I'll ask you, please, put in hard and soft term limits. The last thing we need is career politicians in their positions who don't want to let go and want the good old ways.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal): Thank you, Mr. Reisi, for your presentation.

We'll start with the official opposition. MPP Jeff Burch, you may proceed.

Mr. Jeff Burch: Thank you all for your presentations. It's much appreciated that you took the time to be here. I do have a couple of questions about some comments that were made. First of all, I just want to kind of go back to—and you may not have been here throughout the entire day, but one of the things that surprised me about today is, there have always been some folks who have advocated for one Niagara; that hasn't really happened today, so you're the first three who have actually advocated for that. That's fine; we respect the opinions. Most folks have not—and this is all on the record—been in favour of forced amalgamations, if we look back at all the delegations, so I just wanted to put that out there for fair representation of what we've heard today.

Secondly, Allen, you made a comment about, specifically, money that could be saved through amalgamation. I'm not sure if you meant money that could be saved directly, but it has been brought up a number of times throughout the day that there's all kinds of evidence out there and almost none of it points to any money or tax savings from amalgamation—not even most; none, in multiple countries and jurisdictions. We have a study from

a local professor at Brock who has looked in very great detail at it, and there have been no savings from it.

Aras, you made a distinction that perhaps you could attract economic activity, and that's a fair point, but there are no savings that have ever been identified from amalgamations.

Part-time politicians: When you go to fewer full-time, they hire staff. It's the same with fire services. You may have more deputy chiefs; you may not have a chief. When that all comes out in the wash, no real money is saved.

Can you comment on that, if you agree with that assessment?

Mr. Allen McKay: I don't agree with that assessment. Dr. Marvin Ryder, in the paper yesterday, identified the savings that Hamilton realized. He also made an interesting comment, which I tried to allude to in my presentation, with regard to transit. At the outset, St. Catharines saw the highest-ever property tax increase as a result, while at the same time we saw Niagara regional transit get instituted. Some people were saying, "Well, see? Amalgamation of transit costs us tons and tons of money," but what happened was, when you really look at the numbers and you really dive into the numbers, it was just politicians making decisions to use any type of cost savings in another way, hiring 47 staff and putting millions of dollars into reserve.

Dr. Marvin Ryder said the same thing. He said when there's a pool of money and a pool of savings, politicians will find a way to spend that money. So it's not necessarily related to the actual amalgamation. It's related to them spending that money on other items. And I'm not saying that we don't have needs here in Niagara. There are a bunch of imminent needs, whether that be homelessness or—there are many, many needs where I could see some of those dollars being put back into and invested in moving forward.

So, no, I believe—I truly believe—that amalgamation will save us money.

Mr. Jeff Burch: Okay. Well, fair enough. I guess we can agree to disagree on that.

You had mentioned about St. Catharines. I just wanted to point out that it does have wards still. I was a ward councillor myself at St. Catharines—which goes to the greater point. I understand logically or theoretically where you're coming from: one Niagara, one everything; everything is efficient from a high-level business point of view. But what about the whole issue of local democracy? We've talked about that a number of times today. The folks I talk to and I represent feel that they should have access to someone who they elect that's able to represent them and that it shouldn't be only business interests or only large companies that—you know, this is public money. These are folks who pay property taxes on their homes. A lot of them don't have a lot of money, and they feel that they should be able to have some local representation. One Niagara, with a very, very—I mean, the end result is you could have no politicians and one person making all the decisions. I'm not sure where it ends.

Maybe a comment on the local democracy issue that would result from that kind of huge concentration/amalgamation that you're talking about.

Mr. Allen McKay: I appreciate the question, and that's why I tried to address it in my presentation. I would say, "How does Toronto do it?" How does the city of Toronto do it? And I can tell you how they do it: In the city of Toronto model, they have special community councils whose responsibilities include making recommendations on local planning and development, as well as neighbourhood matters such as traffic plans and parking. They then report up to council with these recommendations. So they do have their input and they do have their opportunity to have feedback. That's one example.

But when we look at these larger municipalities—and I use Toronto as a great example, because how many councillors do they have for the one city and how many people?

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: Twenty-five.

Mr. Allen McKay: Yes. I mean, how do they do it?

When we're crafting this and as we're evolving, I think what you need to do is you need to really take a look at what other municipalities are doing to make sure that citizens are being engaged.

Mr. Jeff Burch: I feel heat coming from the other end of the table from Mary-Margaret, so I think she's going to have a question for you coming up.

Mr. Avi Hooper: Can I just add, less than 30% of the population vote. How important is democracy to the population if they don't recognize how important and valuable their right to vote is?

Mr. Jeff Burch: Well, it's an interesting point, because the Niagara-on-the-Lake mayor talked earlier about how their folks are very happy with their representation and the kind of really grassroots representation they have, and so their numbers are like 56% or 58%. I'm sure if you talk to most folks in Niagara-on-the-Lake—maybe my friend from the Niagara Falls riding could comment—I don't think they would be too happy about not having that representation.

And a question I asked earlier to others was, is that not important, what people want, what the taxpayers want? It's not just how efficient things are from a theoretical business point of view. These are taxpayers' dollars. Most people want some representation and, in most cases, it's like a tiny—almost no money at all it costs in the big picture. In Thorold, I think it was like 0.3 of 1% in cost for their part-time councillors. Why is that an issue?

1740

The Acting Chair (Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal): Thirty seconds remaining.

Mr. Allen McKay: If I could just speak to that: The region has had many opportunities to solicit community feedback. We've been talking about this issue of governance reform for years now. Politicians have continued to kick this can down the road, and there's been no decisions that have been made. We've had the opportunity to engage the public many, many times, but it hasn't been done. I agree with you. They did a questionnaire just a little while ago about taxes. Why wouldn't they integrate—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal): Thank you, Mr. McKay. That concludes our time for the official opposition.

I would like to now move on to the independent member. MPP McMahon.

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: Unfortunately, I have a very short time. But where to start? I just don't know where to start.

As a former Toronto city councillor who ran on term limits—ran on them in 2010, and honoured them. For the one comment by Aras, “No one will ever vote to eliminate their job”—I did. I ran on term limits. I brought term limits—the idea, concept—to Toronto city hall. It was essentially killed—deferred sine die, indefinitely—in the first term, and you can only bring the policy forward once. In the second term, I garnered 11 votes out of 45—that's pretty good—right, left and centre. And then some of them, including the former mayor, didn't honour their two terms. I did run on two terms, and I adhered to it, and I voted myself out of a job in 2018.

So I am all for term limits. I feel that, overall, but especially in Toronto, we talked out of both sides of our mouths on the council chamber floor, saying we wanted gender equity, we wanted diversity, we wanted youth, and yet we wouldn't vacate our seats for 30-plus years. The council chamber did not fully reflect Toronto, obviously, if you take a look at it. So there are people who believe in term limits and who practise them. That's an aside.

Mr. Aras Reisiardekani: Very briefly: I appreciate that perhaps you're an exception to the rule. I hope you take this and advocate for it. By the way, it doesn't necessarily have to be hard term limits. It could be soft term limits that say that after two terms, you've got to sit out, let someone else go in. And, yes, if you're so wonderful, you could come back. That's another option. There could be soft and hard term limits.

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: Yes. Or you can city-build from the outside; that is what I say: volunteer and whatnot. So that is that.

And then the other thing—what's my time?

The Acting Chair (Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal): Two minutes remaining.

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: Okay. We'll barely get to questions, because with Toronto, yes, we did have community councils—which were interesting, because it's extra time and clerks and the whole costing that goes with that, dealing with us at our community council. Some days our Toronto community council—Toronto East York city council, which I was on—would run for hours and hours and maybe into a second day, versus the Etobicoke community council, which did not. Then you would come to full-on council, where we would battle out those minute minutiae issues. Tree removals, parking pads—we would battle them out for hours and hours and hours into three to four days. So I wouldn't hold up Toronto as the full-on model for that.

As well, Toronto city council was cut in half in the middle of an election. It was ridiculous to do that. It is unfair. It is unfair to residents. It's unfair to the politician

who is trying to now—they have two wards instead of one. It did not save money, because they just hired double the staff to deal with it. I question the real reason why it was done, if it's only done for Toronto.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal): Thirty seconds remaining.

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: So anyway, any comments to that?

Mr. Avi Hooper: You've anchored to that experience quite a few times. I could just say to everybody, there's so much focus on cost savings; can we not focus on growth? So many things socially can happen if we grow this economy, and yet all I'm hearing is, “How do we scrimp and save?” We've got huge amounts of reserves on our balance sheet, but we're not using them.

The biggest challenge, not just for this area but for the Canadian economy, is not wealth. We're a wealthy country with a lot of capital. But we can't seem to get it into the real economy, and the housing policy is really a testament. I believe, personally, that this municipal framework and our discussion really highlight why we're not getting capital deployed.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal): Thank you, Mr. Hooper. That concludes our time for the independent members.

We'd like to move to the government side. MPP Sam Oosterhoff.

Mr. Sam Oosterhoff: We have the triple-As here today. I appreciate you all coming.

We've heard a lot from various politicians today. We've heard from a couple of business community people. But I think you're the first panel of—were any of you elected previously? Okay. So you're the first panel, I believe, of regular citizens, people who are speaking from the heart without any sort of strings attached, if you will, in terms of their previous commitments or experiences or anything like that. And all the power to those who spoke earlier in the day who have that service; I'm not holding it against them. But it's great to get that perspective. It's something that we haven't heard a lot of at this committee. Hopefully, when the committee comes back this spring, there will be even more people who are coming from the community to speak. So I appreciate that. You are the first to be pushing for this one-Niagara model.

I specifically want to ask you, Mr. Reisiardekani, with regard to the students you mentioned, are you speaking on behalf of a group of young people who have fed into this or—because you mentioned that. So I'm just wanting to understand more the Gen Z—you look very young, but just not Gen Z young.

Mr. Aras Reisiardekani: No, sadly.

To clarify, though, no, I'm not speaking on the—as a matter of fact, I wanted to bring some of them; I wanted them to be the speakers, but it was such a short time for us that we couldn't get the speakers' announcement in time. To clarify, I speak on behalf, as someone who deals with them, with their lingo—if you'll notice, I've put the smileys and hashtags; they told me you've got to do that. I would like to bring some of them to be able to speak. It

would be amazing if a little bit younger people were able to also speak and get that opportunity. I would love to bring them in the future, if there would be that opportunity.

Mr. Sam Oosterhoff: I would love to hear that, because I think it's really important for this.

We've spoken a lot about the creation of the region and the 12 structures today, in 1970, well before my time, and I think the evolution that we've seen over the 54 years means that we're going to see changes over the next 50; we have to see changes over the next 50. It's the young people you're speaking with who are going to be inheriting this Niagara region and what it may become or change into, that we have to be servicing. That's something I think the committee as a whole has to take into account: what the changes are going to mean not just for the Niagara of today, but the Niagara of a million people, and the Niagara of 20 years down the road. That's very important.

I want to ask a little bit about the concern that was raised with regard to the character of community, specifically—Allen, perhaps you can jump into that—with regard to that pushback that comes back. There is a difference between Grimsby and Niagara-on-the-Lake, and there is a difference between Fort Erie and downtown Smithville, if you will. How do you balance those things? Next thing, you're going to say we have to throw Burlington into the mix. Where do you stop when you start amalgamating everybody, and how do you maintain that local flavour of representation?

Mr. Allen McKay: As a former resident of the city of Hamilton, I would say that Dundas is still Dundas; Binbrook is still Binbrook; Glanbrook is still Glanbrook. You're still going to have that character, even under one city.

Mr. Sam Oosterhoff: But now they all have to pay for the LRT, right? Sorry. That's not Niagara politics. We'll steer clear of that.

I appreciate that, but that concern still remains—that rural representation. You have large urban centres. You would have St. Catharines, Niagara Falls and Welland, who—let's be blunt—together, make up the vast majority of the population. I'm thinking a little bit of my community and the model that you have there. We're 22% of the population. We're actually two thirds of the region by geography. What's to stop Niagara Falls and St. Catharines, in your model, from running roughshod over the rest of the region and saying, "Thank you so much. We'll do things our way"?

Mr. Allen McKay: I think it comes down to strategically having politicians in those areas and strategically laying out how we want our new governance structure to be set up. I think you have to be really strategic with the way that we do that so that people are heard.

I don't know what that final number is. I know that 126 seems excessive; it seems high. Honestly, I've thought about it. Is it—I don't even want to hazard a guess. I don't know. What's Hamilton, 16? Is 16 too little? Maybe, because we're kind of different here in Niagara. So we need a made-in-Niagara solution. I don't know what that number is. But you need to be strategic about how you're

going to put your elected officials out in that community they're going to represent.

1750

Mr. Sam Oosterhoff: Mr. Reisiardekani, you are approaching a bit of a Goldilocks solution—not one, not 13; going with a little bit of an in-between model, from what I can tell. Talk to me about the service delivery under this structure for region-wide services. We know about planning being devolved to the lower tier, the single tier. What about things like police? We already have a service board, but we understand that that's still funded through regional taxes. We've heard about waste water and some of the needs in those areas, or social services. Who runs long-term-care homes that are owned by the region? What do you see as the way that plays out in your model?

Mr. Aras Reisiardekani: I'm not dead set on one particular model. I believe that we need to part ways with the two-tier system and go to a one-tier system. And the reason that I started, by process of elimination, to come to a four-tier system was because I realized the rural regions—I almost bought a farm in West Lincoln. And, yes, I would like those regions to remain independent and, as a matter of fact, there are over 100,000 citizens, when you look at Niagara West as it has been proposed.

You will have four municipalities. They have roughly the same number in taxpayer base and this is basically balancing both: "Yes, we get amalgamation," and "Yes, those who want to still remain can stay." And there is a transition. From my last slide, it says there needs to be a transition. From 12, let's go to four, and maybe down the road in 15 years, 20 years, 30 years, it will become one.

Now, specifically to your answer—right now, these are the lists of services, and the region is handling them.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal): One minute remaining.

Mr. Aras Reisiardekani: Some of them are meter-based, so it doesn't matter how much—look at water treatment. I guess you pay for how much you're using. But, as of now, there's a subcommittee in the region consisting of politicians who are governing these services for the whole region. Transition it to the board.

Mr. Sam Oosterhoff: I have to get time in with Avi. Very quickly: You said you're trained as an economist?

Mr. Avi Hooper: A former portfolio manager for the past two decades.

Mr. Sam Oosterhoff: From your perspective, do you believe the current structure is helping or hindering the potential for growth in Niagara?

Mr. Avi Hooper: Oh, completely hindering, right? Economies of scale are only going to happen if we consolidate—500,000? I mean, compare that around the world. How many cities are 500,000 or more? Many. They all have one government and one administration.

Mr. Sam Oosterhoff: Thank you.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal): Thank you very much, MPP Oosterhoff.

We'd like to move on to the official opposition. MPP Stevens.

Mrs. Jennifer (Jennie) Stevens: Thank you for coming this afternoon—I guess it's early evening; supertime.

As my colleagues across the way have indicated, it was quite interesting to see you come to the table with a different perspective of governance within the Niagara region. We have heard from different politicians and from all levels—well, not all levels, but from the region, the two-tier system, I guess; mayors and city councillors.

I was a city councillor for several years in St. Catharines and I actually represented a ward that was identified by Merritton in the city of St. Catharines. I just wanted a little bit of history: I know Merritton has been thrown around a little bit, as well as Port Dalhousie, but when the amalgamation happened in the city of St. Catharines, the Merritton residents didn't take it quite kindly. It was a forced amalgamation. It wasn't where they had the opportunity to go to a town hall, and they didn't get the chance to go to the city of St. Catharines and say, "You know what? We really don't want to be amalgamated. We want to keep our township." Similarly, I'm sure Thorold wouldn't want to become part of Merritton.

But when I say that, I say it with great interest in what your perspective is of one Niagara. I want to ask—maybe whoever wants to take this question: With the amalgamation of one Niagara, what would your vision be to protect residents of townships like Merritton that had the largest economic growth in St. Catharines? That's why St. Catharines wanted to adopt Merritton—and I've always said, if St. Catharines treated their adopted child the way they treated Merritton, they'd be in jail.

So I want to know, from your perspective, if we would go for one city or one Niagara or one major municipality, how can we, like Niagara-on-the-Lake or Thorold, continue to keep their identity and make sure their services are at par; that the one megacity doesn't ignore that part and just use them for their economic engine or use them for the growth of the tax base that they might be able to create within the smaller municipalities that we do have in the region? Does anybody want to take that on?

Mr. Allen McKay: Like I had mentioned earlier, I think it's the institution of certain committees, right? I participate with the Coalition for a Better St. Catharines. Quite often, we'll get together and we'll put some recommendations together and go speak in front of city council. I think it's the institution of those types of committees and those types of service groups that will keep these locals, whether it's Thorold or whether it's Merritton or whether it's Port Dalhousie—it will keep them together and it will keep them alive.

Mrs. Jennifer (Jennie) Stevens: So you're saying that—just a clarification; I'm sorry. Your vision is that local taxpayers within municipalities or cities would then make sure that the protection is there instead of elected representation?

Mr. Allen McKay: Well, again, in Toronto they've set up special community councils, is what they're called, which I've just recently become aware of. I found that that

was really interesting, in a way, for certain areas of Toronto to maintain their voice. They come up with recommendations. I would suggest maybe doing the same thing here.

I volunteer on a committee, the Coalition for a Better St. Catharines, and I go and I participate. We get together. We talk about issues around the city and then we come and we bring it to the city. We talk to them about possibly making some changes based on some recommendations we put forward. I think it's going to be the same thing here.

Mrs. Jennifer (Jennie) Stevens: Okay, great.

Mr. Aras Reisiardekani: Can I answer that question as well, if you don't mind?

Mrs. Jennifer (Jennie) Stevens: Sure, if you want to join in.

Mr. Aras Reisiardekani: For example, for a city model, look at Niagara Falls. Niagara Falls will be run by representatives elected from Niagara Falls, Niagara-on-the-Lake and Fort Erie. So, those municipalities, they'll vote to have an elected representative to be there and serve their interest.

But on the flipside of the coin, Niagara Falls has the casino money. Now they have to start sharing the casino money with Fort Erie, which is less fortunate with less resources and income. So you could look at it the other way: Why should the big municipalities that have a lot of resources want to share their resources with the smaller ones?

Mrs. Jennifer (Jennie) Stevens: Yes, thank you for your opinion on that.

I want to just correct for the record—maybe I didn't say it properly to you, or you misunderstood me. When I was a city councillor, we had 12 city councillors and one mayor in the city of St. Catharines, which we have now, which is six wards. Each and every one of those city councillors are part-time. Each and every one of those city councillors are the grassroots to the people within their community. In my personal opinion, being that, I guess, ward healer, may you say—they say Merritton has the most stop signs because I protected my residents. I'm just joking. But anyways, now St. Catharines is my baby, and I respect every resident in the city of St. Catharines like I did my Merritton ward.

However, our councillors that are grassroots that go to their grocery store and don't get past the head of lettuce because their local people are coming to them and telling them what they hear on the ground: In your personal opinion, would you feel that, because we cut those politicians—make them full-time; do whatever you want. Do you feel we'll get a bang for our money for the person who is sitting at the park bench with their grandchild and hears about the grass growing beyond their knees, or do you think that it will become that one megacity—I'm just asking your opinion—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal): One minute remaining.

Mrs. Jennifer (Jennie) Stevens: —that some of the municipal-level services that they get will be cut from that personal that they get from their city councillor now?

Mr. Avi Hooper: I think it's more just about an expectation. Frankly, I just think our expectations, our standard

of living—it's just extraordinarily high, and we have to accept, and I tried to highlight in my presentation, that the standard of living is in decline. Part of that is going to be service levels. So while you can't necessarily pick up your phone and speak to your local councillor, I would expect the right representation at the unified level and that representation is going to be able to provide some element of service, but maybe not to the standard we've been used to for the last two decades.

The next two decades will be challenging, and we have to accept that and we have to work with that reality.

Mr. Wayne Gates: Have I got time?

The Acting Chair (Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal): We have 20 seconds left if you would like to say anything.

Mr. Wayne Gates: I'll answer your question. I'll tell you, if you want to make sure that we have a good standard of living, we've got to make it easier to join a union so that they get fair wages and fair benefits. That's exactly where we have to go in this country. What's happening—

Interjection.

Mr. Wayne Gates: Let me finish. It's my 20 seconds—

The Acting Chair (Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal): Thank you, MPP Gates. That concludes our time.

I'd like to go to MPP McMahon.

1800

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: Thank you very much, and thank you—I didn't get to say—to all three for coming in and sharing your stories and your ideas, which are very different than what we heard today.

Avi, I needed you to answer my phone when I was city councillor when one of my first calls was about having too much sand on the boardwalk and what I was going to do about it. I could have used your help with that. You could have dealt with that.

This is a question for all of you: What are your thoughts on the Peel reversal? Because we started down the route of divorce and now we're backtracking.

Mr. Allen McKay: I didn't like it from the very start. If they were going about that to save money and be more efficient, the dissolution of Peel—I'm glad they reversed it. I think that was the right decision to make, because it was going to be too costly. That's why the four-city model here I don't believe will be effective. It's why I think one city is the way to go. It's much easier to amalgamate than it is to dissolve a region. That's my opinion.

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: But how do we know that with this report we're going to start going along with that whatever is recommended and debated and whatnot in the chamber is not going to be reversed? We have a history of reversals with this government. Do you have faith that something will actually happen?

Mr. Allen McKay: I've been on this bandwagon of needing some type of governance change for years, through multiple governments that have been in power. I'm an optimistic guy. I'd like to think that one day we're going to see this change. Until that happens, I feel like the guy from the Shawshank Redemption, where I just keep writing letters and keep writing letters and keep writing

letters and keep writing letters until I'm finally heard and we get that money for the library.

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: Okay.

I'll ask that, and whether you have faith that something will actually happen here or it will be reversed, and also, what do you think of dealing with this in the middle of a housing crisis? Will it rock the boat on putting shovels in the ground and getting our housing built, as we heard today from many people? Aras?

Mr. Aras Reisiardekani: I hear that sometimes, that we should have to focus on house-building, and yes, we do, but good governance is also part of house-building.

Another issue that I want to bring is that sometimes we are thinking too much about big developers. But what about mom-and-pop developers? When you have too much complexity, when there are 12 different zoning by-laws and 12 different parts and two levels, small developers will not be able to afford to pay through this complicated and expensive process, while the rich, wealthy—I'll give you an example. Right now, our farmers, their path to retirement is to sell their land to land developers who come from Toronto—nothing against them—to develop it. But because the barrier to entry is too much—and that's what I say. I want to see one building that people can go there and build it. We need to help the small little guys to be able to become developers. I think that's part of the solution for housing affordability, in my opinion.

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: Okay. Thank you.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal): One minute remaining.

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: One minute. Over to Avi: Bring it home.

Mr. Avi Hooper: I just want to think about how we move forward. I'm pragmatic. I'm realistic. By the way, I only moved to the area three years ago. I recognize that a lot of these policies and procedures are quite old in time, and they definitely need an update.

So, the current structure, no, it will not be successful. It definitely needs a change. All I would say is our future is in your hands. You've got to make change. You must make change, somehow. This is unsustainable. Our fixed costs must find a way to be managed within this environment of an aging population.

Ms. Mary-Margaret McMahon: Okay. Thank you very much.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal): We'll now move to the government side. MPP Matthew Rae.

Mr. Matthew Rae: My question is for Avi. Given your experience that you alluded to in your presentation and through the questions around the financial market and your history in that, why is a one-city model good for growth? Because at least the government in Ontario is 100% focused on tracking that investment. And being this close to Buffalo, New York, we're competing with a very, very attractive place to invest in. Pennsylvania is not far. I live closer to Detroit; Detroit's not that far. So I was just wondering if you can elaborate on why the two-tier current system is not conducive to attracting that investment.

Mr. Avi Hooper: Great question. First of all, it's size. To achieve economies of scale—we talk about the needed investment—we've got to do that over a large enough population. Okay, we've got 500,000. I think that's plenty, so let's start there so decisions get made more effectively.

The other thing I would highlight is the disparity between the region, because, to your point, I'm pretty surprised at why our wine region is not even seeing more American tourism. That's kind of my point, and the only rationale or conclusion I've come up with is because of its disparity in policies, because there's a lack of co-operation. Can you imagine, if the two wine appellations actually worked together, what could be achieved?

When's the last time a hotel was built here in St. Catharines? I talk about Niagara Falls, Niagara-on-the-Lake doing successfully, well in tourism, yet St. Catharines doesn't seem to benefit at all, or very little. That doesn't make a lot of sense, and if I'm a foreign investor or I'm just a domestic Canadian pension plan—which, by the way, I also question; why are they not invested? Our savings, the excess savings, get accumulated here in Canada and leave the country. They should be invested here. We seemingly not only cannot attract foreign investment, but we can't even seem to attract domestic investment, so something we're doing in our policy and our procedures is not working.

Mr. Matthew Rae: Thank you for that. I know in the fall economic statement provincially, we're looking at attracting some of that: the Canada Pension Plan, for example; the Ontario teachers' plan; OMERS. People are shocked—as you would know very well, Avi—that we helped build California, for example, with some of those pension funds, versus not helping build Toronto or Niagara.

Mr. Avi Hooper: Even worse, OMERS, the municipal pension fund, is losing and going to write down about C\$1 billion in the water infrastructure in the United Kingdom,

and all I've heard today is how much water infrastructure investment is required locally. With OMERS, we as taxpayers are contributing to their pension on behalf of the staff who work for the public sector.

Mr. Matthew Rae: Right. Thank you very much.

That segues well into my concluding remarks, Chair. I know we heard a lot today about challenges with getting homes built, and waste water infrastructure was one of those. I know that through the Ontario Infrastructure Bank and the \$200 million that we announced in the fall economic statement—which was unfortunate that the official opposition voted against—will help get homes built. I know it was also alluded to that our federal colleagues need to come to the table on waste water infrastructure—as has been in the past, as you know, Chair—with those allotments to get homes built across Ontario.

As I mentioned earlier, we will return to Niagara. I know it has been very robust, and a lot of great ideas—a variety of ideas, which is wonderful to hear. I was very pleased when the minister—it was way more work, from the parliamentary assistant to the minister, but I was pleased the minister asked this committee to do that work in a public forum, so that all parties and the public and citizens could participate.

With that, I cede my time, sir.

The Acting Chair (Mr. Hardeep Singh Grewal): Thank you very much, MPP Rae.

I'd like to thank our guests. Mr. Reisi, Mr. Hooper, Mr. McKay, thank you for joining us here today and sharing your valuable feedback. I'd like to thank all of our spectators that have taken their time to be here with us, some from the morning all the way until the evening. Thank you, everybody. Thank you, members of this committee.

The committee will now be adjourned until 10 a.m. on Thursday, January 11, 2024. Thank you, everyone.

The committee adjourned at 1808.

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Also taking part / Autres participants et participantes

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