

Township of Severn 2024-25 Ward Boundary Review Backgrounder

Discussion Paper E: Why a Ward Boundary Review?

The objective of a Ward Boundary Review is to conduct a comprehensive review of Severn's electoral arrangements to develop an effective and equitable system of representation. Although there is support for reviewing the wards in Severn, the present electoral map must still be evaluated as a way to help identify which features need to change to achieve effective representation (see Discussion Paper D) and which features might remain in place.

Severn's present ward design dates from 2016 when the municipality's population was approximately 13,480 (2016 Census population and excludes seasonal population). The 2021 Census population was estimated at more than 14,570 (excluding seasonal population) and projected growth is anticipated to take that number to over 16,750 by 2036 (excluding seasonal population)¹. As a community changes, so should its electoral arrangements, more than ever when there are perceptible and inequitable discrepancies in the population of existing wards, as will be discussed below.

A necessary step in a ward boundary review is to assess the extent to which the existing wards meet the guiding principles for a ward system that achieves the goal of effective representation (see Discussion Paper D). In this Discussion Paper, the status quo will therefore be subject to the same "tests" as any alternative designs (that is, representation by population, population trends, physical and natural boundaries and communities of interest) to identify its strengths and weaknesses.

Preliminary Insights into the Severn Ward System

Before developing alternatives to the current system in the ward boundary review phase, it is appropriate to apply the same guiding principles to the current system to determine whether it is actually still viable and, if not, what shortcomings need to be considered in designing alternatives. If the current system successfully meets the guiding principles, no ward boundary review would be needed at this time.

Representation by Population (Population Parity): One goal of this review is to design a system of representation that achieves relative parity in the population of the wards, with some degree of variation acceptable considering population densities and

¹ Census Population derived from the [2024 Township of Severn Development Charges Background Study](#), June 28, 2024.



other demographic factors across the Township. The indicator of success in a ward design is the extent to which the individual wards approach an “optimal” size.

In a symmetrical ward system where each ward elects the same number of councillors, optimal size² can be understood as a mid-point on a scale where the term “optimal” (O) describes a ward with a population within 5% on either side of the calculated optimal size which is itself identified by dividing the overall population of the municipality by the number of wards. The classification “below/above optimal” (O+ or O-) is applied to a ward with a population between 6% and 25% on either side of the optimal size. A ward that is labelled “outside the range” (OR+ or OR-) indicates that its population is greater than 25% above or below the optimal ward size. The adoption of a 25% maximum variation is based on federal redistribution legislation but is widely used in municipalities like Severn where there are population clusters of different sizes, as well as rural territory, and anticipated residential developments in the future.

Current population figures (2021 Census excluding seasonal) of only one of the current five wards in Severn is at the optimal size and one exceeds it by a wide margin, the present ward configuration is problematic. Given the importance of working within the generous range of population variation, the Consultant Team would assess any ward configuration that includes even a single ward outside that range as failing to meet the parity principle entirely. Noting that these population figures exclude seasonal, and seasonal is a large component of Severn, when the Consultant team reviews future population projections and alternative ward boundaries, seasonal populations will be accounted for. As presented through the 2016 Ward Boundary Review final report, seasonal populations are not equally distributed across the wards within Severn, with a large portion of the seasonal population falling within the current Ward 1, Ward 4 and Ward 5, with minimal populations falling within Wards 2 and 3 and may address to some level of the population disparity between wards.

² This calculation can also be considered the “average” ward population.



Figure Ei – Comparative Population by Ward: 2021 Census

Ward	Area (SqKm)	2021		
		Census Population	Population Variance	Optimal Range
Ward 1	198.6	1,798	0.62	OR-
Ward 2	161.8	3,343	1.15	O+
Ward 3	53.2	4,542	1.56	OR+
Ward 4	19.4	2,894	0.99	O
Ward 5	130.0	1,999	0.69	OR-
Total/Average	563.0	14,576	2,915	

Source: Statistics Canada 2021 Census – DB Level Data compiled by Watson & Associates Economists Ltd.

Note: Population does not include seasonal population. Seasonal population will be built in as part of the analysis.

Population and Electoral Trends: Ward boundary reviews consider anticipated population trends to ensure that the ward structure initially provides effective representation beyond the 2026 municipal election. Future population growth in Severn over the next decade will be concentrated in locations where municipal water and wastewater infrastructure is already available, meaning primarily Coldwater, Westshore and the southern area adjacent to the Township’s boundary with the City of Orillia. One important growth area is located in the present Ward 4 where the population was already well in excess of the optimal figure in 2021. As a result, there is every expectation that the wards will become even more unbalanced by 2034 and, if left unchanged, the existing ward configuration will not likely achieve population parity over time and will fall short of meeting this principle as well. In other words, the current ward configuration will not grow into parity but possibly further away from it.³

Geographical and Topographical Features: This principle seeks to include wards that use geographical and topographical features to mark boundaries while keeping the wards compact and easy to understand.

One significant manufactured feature that cuts through three wards but it is no longer used as a ward boundary is Highway 11. With the exception of the Ward 5 boundary with Ward 1 between the Severn River and Mount Stephen Road (along Swift Rapids Road) and a portion of the boundary with Ward 2 (which is a line on a map extending

³ It should be noted that the City of Orillia is currently undertaking a Municipal Comprehensive Review (MCR) process that includes investigating the potential for expanding its municipal boundary into Severn Township. In the event the City is successful, it is unlikely to have a significant impact on the population of Severn and the ward configuration adopted from this review.



Mount Stephen Road from Carlyon Line to a line on a map marking the extension of Brennan Line), all other boundaries are straight lines using the grid of Township roads.

The present ward boundary lines in Severn meet this principle.

Community or Diversity of Interests: Electoral districts in Canada are not traditionally considered to be merely arithmetic divisions of the electorate designed to achieve parity of voting power. Rather, they are part of a system “which gives due weight to voter parity but admits other considerations where necessary.” One of the customary other considerations is “community of interest.” The rationale is that electoral districts should, as far as possible, be cohesive units and areas with common interests related to representation.⁴

Without question, contemporary Severn includes several distinctive communities of interest and that is one of the reasons why a ward system continues to make sense. The previous sections demonstrate that the existing wards fall short of meeting the population principles, but do they constitute an acceptable system of representation if the community of interest is used as the primary measure of success?

The initial generalization is that, in terms of community of interest in Severn, there are two wards that meet this principle. Ward 4 is largely based on the Westshore community while Ward 3 includes Marchmont and Ardtrea, although the surrounding area there is a mixture of rural, commercial and other interests. The other wards are larger geographic areas and overall are more sparsely settled. As noted the previous section, Highway 11 is a significant manufactured feature that separates adjacent parts of three wards from one another, but is not accepted in those areas as an impediment to the connections between the lakefront and inland communities.

It is helpful to include here a section of a report prepared for the 2016 Ward Boundary Review in Severn:

“Municipalities like Severn that are located in recreational areas in Ontario’s mid-north are usually not laid out in the spatial patterns that are more typical of urban centres in Ontario where a population and commercial node is surrounded by less densely populated areas directly connected to the centre by a grid of rural roads. Severn is unique in having two small population nodes (Coldwater and Washago) at extreme ends of the municipality, a growing “suburban” neighbourhood near the Township border with the City of Orillia, a major linear population grouping (that lacks a “main street”) along one part of its perimeter plus hundreds of recreational properties lining the waterways found along other perimeters, as well as a significant agricultural community. Despite the presence of several

⁴ Reference re *Provincial Electoral Boundaries (Sask.)* [1991], known as the Carter decision, page 35.



residential clusters across the municipality there is actually no “centre”; the Township’s interior is arguably less coherent politically than its edges, with no obvious focal point that effectively connects the main population centres.”⁵

In this respect, three of the present wards in Severn are composed of separate and distinct population clusters that are relatively remote from one another. The present wards have been created to reflect this challenge and can be said on the whole to address this principle successfully.

Effective Representation: The specific principles listed above are all subject to the overriding principle of “effective representation” as enunciated by the Supreme Court of Canada.⁶ The concept of effective representation was derived from the equality provision of the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms*: the “voting power” of citizens should be as close to parity as possible so that the voice of each one in the deliberations of government will be represented evenly and fairly. The Court noted that relative parity of voting power was a prime, but not an exclusive, condition of effective representation since other factors – such as those summarized above – contribute to the achievement of effective representation.

In Severn, there are significantly different relationships between constituents and councillors in terms of present and, in particular, future population distributions and community groupings that hinder the achievement of effective representation. Specifically, one councillor has nearly 2,500 more constituents to serve (and represent) as another. The present configuration embeds a dilution of the votes cast by certain electors compared to others and weakens the democratic expectation that when the five councillors decide on a matter before them, each vote is cast on behalf of a relatively equal number of residents.

The present boundaries fall short of meeting this over-arching principle and the imbalance will become even greater as forecast population growth is realized. The present wards do not, in our assessment, ensure effective voter representation.

Overview: No ward design is likely to meet all the principles in their entirety; however, the best designs maximize adherence to the principles, especially in relation to representation by population and effective representation. It is our understanding of existing case law that deviations from the specific principles can be justified by other criteria drawn from the Carter decision in a manner that is more supportive of effective

⁵ Watson and Associates, Township of Severn Ward Boundary Review Interim Report, August 11, 2016, page 4-4.

⁶ Reference re *Provincial Electoral Boundaries (Sask.)* [1991], known as the Carter decision, page 35.



representation. **Our preliminary assessment points to the conclusion that a ward boundary review in Severn is necessary.**

Figure Eii: Existing Severn Ward Configuration Evaluation Summary

Principle	Does the Current Ward Structure Meet the Respective Principle?^[1]	Comment
Representation by Population	No	Only one ward is at the optimal point and one ward exceeds the $\pm 25\%$ range of variation.
Population and Electoral Trends	No	Population growth will not overcome the existing population imbalance.
Geographical and Topographical features	Largely Successful	Most boundaries are regular and visible lines although Hwy 11 divides three wards.
Community or Diversity of Interests	Largely Successful	The wards address this principle successfully despite the complex geography of the Township.
Effective Representation	No	Population imbalances hinder the achievement of effective voter representation

^[1] The degree to which each guiding principle is satisfied is ranked as “**Yes**” (fully satisfied), “**Largely Successful**,” “**Partially Successful**,” or “**No**” (not satisfied).



Topical Discussion Papers A to E

Discussion Papers will be available to residents, each addressing one of the topics to be considered in this review:

- Discussion Paper A – The Severn Electoral System
- Discussion Paper B – What is the Optimal Size for a Municipal Council?
- Discussion Paper C – The Component Parts of the Severn Council
- Discussion Paper D – Guiding Principles to Design Wards
- *Discussion Paper E – Why a Ward Boundary Review?*