



Status Update – GBA Work on Ontario Review of Municipal Structure

Dated October 31, 2019

On October 25, 2019, the Ontario government announced they will not impose any municipal realignment in the province, but instead will work with municipalities so that they themselves may investigate how to become more effective and efficient. This removes the need, in the short term, to address potential changes to the status of the Township of Georgian Bay (TGB) within the District of Muskoka and allows for time to consider the situation and review next steps.

Below is a summary of what has transpired since this first came to light.

Background

Ontario Review of Regional Municipalities

Late in 2018 the province announced a review of 73 municipalities in one county and eight regions, which included the District of Muskoka. It launched a general consultation with residents of the areas last spring, but made no specific proposals for people to react to.

GBA recognized both the threat and a potential opportunity in the Georgian Bay area at the time, given the concern that the province might decide to consolidate all townships in Muskoka, including the Township of Georgian Bay (TGB), into one large municipality. The TGB is now part of the District of Muskoka which has a two-tier structure: district government and local townships, each responsible for specific functions. The TGB covers the southern part of the Georgian Bay Biosphere Reserve (GBBR), from the Severn River up to Twelve Mile Bay near the Moon River. It is home to five GBA member associations – Twelve Mile Bay, Wah Wah Taysee, Madawaska Club at Go Home Bay, Cognashene and Honey Harbour.

The October 25 announcement of the Ontario government decision has effectively removed the above threat to TGB for the time being. However, in the long term the municipal structure on the east and north shores of Georgian Bay should be addressed with a view to providing the strongest protections for the environment and the interests of ratepayers, particularly from increasing development pressures.

Long-Term Concerns

GBA remains concerned that the province might in the future decide to create larger, more populous municipalities that are supposedly more efficient and cost effective, which could lead to amalgamating coastal municipalities with inland municipalities or districts. If this were to occur then several major negative consequences are likely to arise:

- The preservation and protection of the Biosphere Reserve area will be compromised.
- Representation on municipal councils, responsiveness to local concerns and needs of seasonal residents on the coast, and control over issues of importance to coastal communities will be diminished.
- Local planning control, including the Official Plans and zoning by-laws, as well as local building and site plan controls, will be eroded over time. This is a major issue for Georgian Bay given that current plans and zoning rules for the coast emphasize preserving the natural environment and limiting development, and many coastal communities currently have highly valued local community plans.
- The problem of paying high taxes for services not received on the coast will be exacerbated.

Actions Taken by GBA over the Summer

Last May, GBA became aware that a local citizens' group in the TGB had commissioned a report by Dr. Robert Williams on potentially splitting TGB into coastal and inland sections (basically divided by Hwy 400) to recognize the distinctly different nature and needs of the coastal part from the inland part. TGB Mayor Peter Koetsier was quoted on this opportunity for restructuring municipal boundaries, with the coastal section possibly joining a larger coastal municipality on the Bay. After the report was completed, GBA received a copy of the paper and permission to circulate it.

In June, GBA Initiated work on a draft position paper on the municipal structure issue which addressed the need to respond to the threat described above and positioned the potential opportunity for a larger coastal municipality as a viable alternative. The purpose of the paper was to seek input and support from GBA member associations to make submissions to the province before it made any decisions on municipal structure in the Georgian Bay area that might have a negative impact on the Bay and the interests of our members. As background, GBA referred to the historical reports on this subject done from 1975 to 2000. The 2019 Williams report was also useful in terms of understanding the viability of splitting the TGB coastal area from the inland area, which GBA views as a prerequisite for any proposal to create a larger coastal municipality.

The draft paper was completed in July, and both the GBA's Executive Committee and Board of Directors approved its distribution to member associations for consultation on the issue. We also circulated the draft paper to certain municipal politicians, including Township of the Archipelago (ToA) Councillors, for both information and comment. At the same time, we circulated the Williams report as it provided new information on this issue. GBA sent the draft paper to both associations and municipalities at the same time.

Feedback from associations was generally supportive, but although no objections were raised, the boards of some associations were not comfortable taking a position on the issue without consulting more broadly with their members, while others in the north did not consider the issue to be very relevant to them. Many specific comments were made on what the impact on local services, municipal costs and taxes might be. Some questions were also raised on service sharing with neighbouring inland municipalities, and how that might affect any amalgamation proposal, and on the logistics of delivering services across a larger, elongated coastal municipality, even if service needs were broadly aligned.

In August Rupert Kindersley, GBA's Executive Director and John Carson, GBA's President, met with the Reeve/Mayor and Chief Administrative Officers of ToA and Carling, and the Mayor and a Councillor at TGB, and discussed the potential to work together on individual or joint analysis of the main planning, services, tax, infrastructure and other issues relevant to considering a larger coastal municipality.

Municipalities' Actions

Following the Ontario review of regional municipalities announcement in late 2018, ToA spent significant time and effort to update their Strategic Plan and consult on this with their constituents at meetings over the summer and at the Deerhorn Conference on October 5.

Also, in August, the ToA made a submission and presentation to Minister of Municipal Affairs Steve Clark at the Association of Municipalities Ontario conference, which made the case that ToA is unique as a municipality and should not be amalgamated with any other municipality without careful consideration. Their submission listed many issues that need to be addressed before any amalgamation could be considered.

TGB has not acted on the concept of splitting the municipality to reflect the two very different communities – inland and coastal, primarily due to the challenges of dealing with such a proposal.

Carling has advised that it has no interest in amalgamation.

Current Status – October 2019

Prior to the province's October 25 announcement that it will not impose changes on municipalities, we did not achieve a clear consensus from GBA member associations on potential amalgamation and on the position the GBA might take in making submissions to the province and others. As a result, GBA has not made any submissions. However, many are supportive of taking a big-picture view of the need for stronger municipal government to best serve the mainly water-based communities along the coast and to protect the Biosphere Reserve region. Discussions have provided valuable information on the extent of the challenges and obstacles to changing municipal structure.

Amalgamation Advisory Committee Call

In September, prior to the provincial October 25 announcement to not impose changes, the GBA created the Amalgamation Advisory Committee comprised of representatives from different regions of the coast to provide input and advice on the issues involved in a potential amalgamation. The Committee met by conference call in early October to finalize its mandate, review actions taken by GBA over the summer and the current status.

The Committee agreed that given the lack of a strong consensus on making submissions to the province on a larger coastal municipality, GBA could at least state opposition to Muskoka being converted to a single-tier municipality that includes TGB, and deliver the key messages on the importance of preserving the integrity of the Biosphere Reserve in any decisions made on municipal structure in the region.

GBA Executive Committee and Board of Directors Decisions

GBA's Executive Committee recommended and the Board decided to attempt to speak to the Minister and government directly to determine the status of its review, state our opposition to Muskoka being converted to a single-tier municipality that includes TGB, and explain why it is vital to preserve the integrity of the Georgian Bay Biosphere Reserve and prioritize preserving and protecting the eastern coast of the Bay.

The Amalgamation Advisory Committee and Board will now revisit its decisions in light of the province's announcement that it will not mandate changes in municipal structure.

Next Steps

Following the October 25 announcement, GBA will review our strategy and next steps on the issue of municipal structure. We will consider what other options might exist to protect the coastal environment from development and other pressures. Given the Ontario government's announcement, there is now time to determine next steps. We will seek input from the Amalgamation Advisory Committee and make recommendations to the Board in the near future.