

ANATOMY OF an Amalgamation – Part III

* **Editor's Note:** On January 1, 2007, the Town of Killarney and the RM of Turtle Mountain amalgamated into the Municipality of Killarney-Turtle Mountain. While not the first neighbouring municipalities to merge in the province, the practice is not widespread. The Municipal Leader approached the 'new' municipality and asked if they would share their experiences with our readers.

By the RM of Killarney-Turtle Mountain

We introduced you to Killarney-Turtle Mountain's journey to amalgamation in the Winter, 2006/07 issue of the Leader, and checked in again in the Fall, 2007 issue to see how they were making out. In this issue, we offer you the final installment of "Anatomy of an Amalgamation," where we find out what they have learned and what they can teach others.

BACKGROUND

The process was initiated in the spring of 1997, following a request from the Chamber of Commerce to consider the possibility of amalgamating the municipalities.

The purpose was to:

- achieve efficiency and less governance
- preserve and build upon the cooperation between the two ; and
- streamline the development and planning processes, to eliminate conflicts and benefit new potential development in the area.

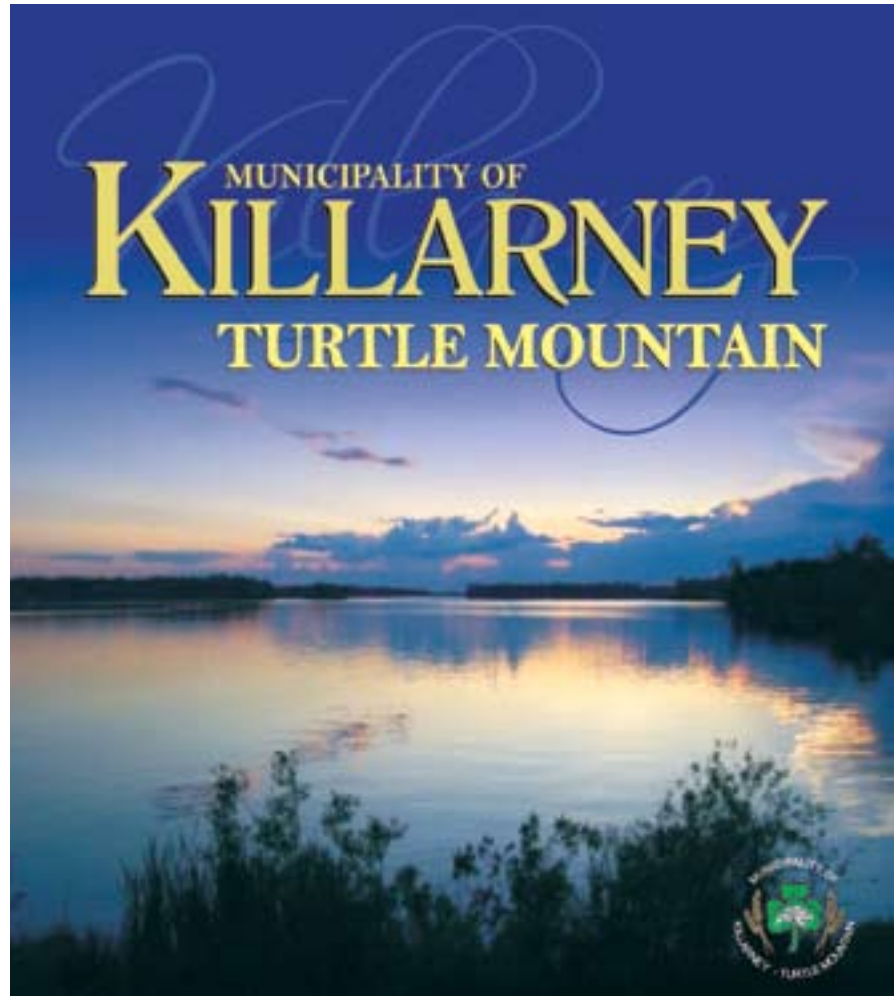
THE STUDY PROCESS

A Steering Committee was struck to examine the issue of amalgamation. The committee contracted external consultants to undertake a feasibility study on their behalf. The outcome of the study was development of a model for amalgamation. The model had the following objectives: to provide a blueprint for implementing amalgamation and to address the concerns regarding amalgamation. The Steering Committee and the two councils endorsed the findings of the report, and agreed to continue examining the issue.

The first of two public meetings was held for the consultants to present the report findings to the public, for the public to ask questions of the consultant and express any concerns, and for the Committee to discuss the next steps of the process.

The general issues/concerns expressed at the public meetings were:

- adequate service delivery
- municipal taxation rates



- rural vs. urban share of existing reserves and debt
- adequate representation on Council
- future economic development
- savings generated by amalgamation, and
- continued cooperation among the councils

The Steering Committee, which was re-struck as the Restructuring Committee, continued with the next steps in the process, which were:

Public education about the proposed amalgamation - Questions and Answers were placed in the Killarney Guide, two brochures were developed and a second public meeting was held.

Addressing the concerns about the amalgamation and quantifying additional benefits - A more detailed examination of administrative and operational aspects of the municipality was undertaken to identify additional efficiencies.

Observation about the process -

Several observations can be made about the activities undertaken by the consultants, the Committee, the councils and the administration:

CONSULTANTS

- Some individuals felt that the consultants were pushing amalgamation and not being neutral on the issue.

**THE STEERING/
RESTRUCTURING COMMITTEE**

- Considerable energy was expended by the Committee to address questions and outstanding concerns of Councillors.
- Despite the considerable effort and educational activities undertaken by the Committee the public continued to ask questions and express concerns. Committee members questioned the impact of their public education effort.
- One of the biggest barriers to the amalgamation appeared simply to be a desire to maintain the status quo.

THE COUNCILS

- Council's attempt to be neutral on the issue, rather than being perceived as open-minded, was criticized.
- Because they did not present a unified front at the first public meeting, public skepticism and mistrust about the amalgamation proposal generally resulted.
- Several of the concerns expressed at the public meeting related to issues that had been addressed by the feasibility study. The public was clearly dissatisfied with the responses of the consultants and wanted to know Council's positions on the issues.
- Most of those who asked questions of the consultant were opposed to the proposed amalgamation. Vocal advocates of the amalgamation at the meeting may have served to balance the general mood.
- The lack of rural Council consensus at the second public meeting further contributed to the belief that the proposed amalgamation would benefit the urban municipality at the expense of the rural municipality.
- Clear public opinion should be obtained for officials to be bound to the wishes of the electorate.

ADMINISTRATION

- Because the identified dollar savings were small, the public perceived that the benefits of amalgamation were mostly non-financial. However, because those

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The Municipality of Killarney-Turtle Mountain has embarked on an aggressive strategy to recruit newcomers to the area. Below is an excerpt from their comprehensive brochure:

Killarney is the perfect place to retire or relocate. It is a community ready to welcome newcomers – the door is wide open! With rapidly improving technology, it is easy to do business globally while choosing a home base locally. The world is at your fingertips while you can enjoy small town life and all the benefits it brings. Affordable cost of living in a safe and growing community top the list of things attracting new people to Killarney. There is also a growing demand for professionals in a number of fields, including health care and a constant need for skilled trades workers for a variety of local businesses and services.

Maybe you're looking for a community where you can relax and enjoy the retirement phase of life. Affordable housing in a scenic community makes Killarney a popular place for retirees. Access to excellent medical care and a long list of leisure activities and programs aimed at seniors to stay busy and active along with all the shopping and services you need right down the street make it an easy choice to relocate to Killarney.



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benefits were not clearly articulated, some individuals questioned why amalgamation was being discussed.

- If the additional savings had been known earlier, they could have been factored into the feasibility study findings and reported at the first public meeting, making the financial benefits of the proposed amalgamation more attractive.

LESSONS LEARNED

Council consensus at the outset would enhance acceptance of amalgamation.

Consensus within and between Council on the amalgamation issue may have demonstrated to the public that there were no “hidden agendas” and may have increased the likelihood of acceptance of committee recommendations. Divisive Council opinion may result in divisive public opinion.

Elected officials are community leaders. While outside facilitators/consultants may enhance perception of neutrality, it is important that the public view their elected officials as leading the process. Perhaps the “best” or the most effective champions of the amalgamation need to be the officials themselves.

Do not rush the amalgamation process. The public needs time to be educated about, and feel comfortable that they understand, the impact of amalgamation. Constituents may not appreciate or support feeling rushed even if tighter time frame will result in the savings of the cost of an election or other event.

Capitalize on the knowledge of municipal staff. Municipal staff have a wealth of knowledge about the municipality and can contribute significantly to the identification of efficiencies and savings that could result from an amalgamation. Availability of such information would assist in effectively responding to public concerns and would assure the public that the councils have thoroughly analyzed and understood the issues.

Clear public opinion should be obtained. If you are to be bound by public opinion, a clear expression of public opinion should be obtained. The low response rates to the opinion survey may suggest that the majority of electors may have been unconcerned with, or unaware of, the amalgamation proposal.

Develop an effective communication strategy. Effective communication is essential to 1) educate the public about amalgamation; 2) respond to public concerns; and 3) inform the public about the next steps in the process. While use of various media is important to reach as broad an audience as possible, do not underestimate the impact of one-on-one meetings with stakeholders.

CONCLUSION

So if the amalgamation of the two municipalities has not led to the demise of the community, why was there concern regarding the amalgamation? Our community is not that much different from any other in the province, in that our citizens become worried about the uncertainty of change.

Although some ratepayers had concerns regarding the amalgamation, we have not received any specific complaints that the amalgamation is any longer a concern. We are now into the 18th month of the amalgamation and we believe that we are operating the same as most municipalities in the province, just more efficiently. ■

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