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By James Wallace
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Half of Ontario voters favor referendum on amalgamation

One out of every two Ontario voters believes local residents should have the right to annul shotgun mergers between municipalities, an SES Research/Osprey News poll has found.

Fully 50% of those polled support breaking up amalgamated communities if residents choose to do so in a referendum.

Another 33% oppose reversing municipal mergers and 17% were unsure. Nikita Nanos, president of SES Canada Research, said the results suggest the provincial Conservative government continues to bear the scars of its amalgamation push.

“Among certain pockets of voters, amalgamation was seen as heavy handed,” Nanos said.

While the issue has lost some of the sting it carried when the newly elected PC government began merging communities in 1996, it remains one of several “second tier” issues with the potential to characterize the Conservatives in the upcoming provincial campaign, he said.

“At this point, the Ernie Eves government has to be very careful how it manages these issues,” Nanos said.

How the government responds to SARS, West Nile, hydro privatization and issues such as amalgamation won’t drive votes but will demonstrate whether it handles problems well and is willing to listen, he said.

It’s another thing that colors in the picture of Ernie Eves,” Nanos said.



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Amalgamation was intended to save communities money, improve services for residents, lower taxes and reduce duplication but continues to be a controversial issue in communities across Ontario.

“It’s fraught with a lot of emotion,” said Pat Vanini, executive director of the Association of Municipalities of Ontario. “In some places it works, in some it doesn’t.”

The “harsh reality” is that in many cases, the promised efficiencies haven’t materialized, Vanini said.

“I’ve not seen one case where it doesn’t result in ratcheting up costs,” she said.

Between 1995 and 1999, Ontario’s Conservative government restructured and consolidated local councils, reducing the number of municipalities by nearly a third, to 554 from 814.

Amalgamations followed in Kingston, Chatham-Kent, Toronto, Hamilton, Ottawa, Sudbury, Lindsay, Haldimand and Norfolk and restructuring in a number of smaller communities further cut the number of municipalities to 448.

The province also urged amalgamations in Niagara, Waterloo, the County of Oxford and District Municipality of Muskoka.

NDP leader Howard Hampton said forced amalgamations have been “overwhelmingly more expensive” for taxpayers and that his party would reverse mergers if requested by local councils.

“I think it’s clear now this whole thing was a fallacy from the beginning,” Hampton said.

“In many municipalities, I think of the Region of Sudbury for example, if you couple the forced amalgamations with the downloading of all kinds of costs and responsibilities, it’s put many of these amalgamated municipalities



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in the position where they're closing libraries, they're closing hockey rinks, they're closing recreation and community centres and people are rightly very angry," Hampton said.

"They feel they've been lied to and they have," Hampton said.

In the new City of Kawartha Lakes, there is vocal opposition to amalgamation and city council has approved a referendum vote during municipal elections this fall.

Amalgamation opponents also continue to exist in Hamilton, Ottawa and other Ontario communities.

Liberal leader Dalton McGuinty said it may not be possible to break apart municipalities that have been forced together and opposes reversing the merger in his own community, Ottawa.

However, McGuinty also said his party will allow local communities decide their own fate on amalgamation or de-amalgamation.

"I don't want to become Premier so I can start tinkering with the shape of municipalities across the province," McGuinty said.

But I think the people who live in those communities should always have the final say in terms of lending shape to themselves in a way they think will better embrace the future," he said.

The poll of 500 Ontario voters was conducted on May 26 and May 27. It is statistically accurate within 4.5 percentage points, 19 times out of 20 and was registered with the Canadian Survey Research Council.

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