



Province examines future of local governments



Michael Fenn's 2017 report may shed light on possible recommendations in the current regional government review

By Jim Algie

Single-tier regional municipalities may be the way to go in rural Ontario, suggested a 2017 report by one of two provincial government advisers currently reviewing regional municipalities in Ontario.

“One promising approach ... is to address the challenge facing rural communities from a regional, rather than purely local perspective,” said Michael Fenn in his 18-page report commissioned by the Rural Ontario Institute (ROI).

In January, Municipal Affairs and Housing Minister Steve Clark announced the appointments of Fenn, a consultant and former Ontario deputy minister of municipal affairs, and Ken Seiling, a recently retired Waterloo Region chair, to consider adjustments in nine regional governments in central and southwestern Ontario.

Fenn's ROI report predates his recent appointment by two years, and he has stepped down from other consulting projects during the regional government review.

However, his ROI report, *The Impact of Megatrends on Rural Development in Ontario*, anticipated some issues outlined in government directions for the Fenn/Seiling consultation.

Among his conclusions, Fenn recommended “better use of regional entities to advance the solutions to infrastructure challenges.” Private sector investors should also be allowed “to play a bigger role in infrastructure delivery,” he said.

Fenn made the case that new digital communications systems, evolving infrastructure and related technologies as well as changes in demographics create new opportunities for rural communities.

Digital communications and management techniques create new opportunities for rural communities by reducing the effects of time and distance on the delivery of goods and services, Fenn said.

“Digital technology can bring global resources and the best minds in health, education, skills training and agricultural enterprise, readily and inexpensively, to every rural community and to every farm kitchen,” he said.

Driverless cars and shared electric vehicles, automated interurban trains, Internet-sourced sales and distribution networks all “combine to make living in small town Ontario a practical option – for the first time – for many city dwellers facing high housing costs or retirement,” Fenn said.

He predicted two decades of rapid change which may affect rural communities and the rural economy more significantly than their urban counterparts.

“Too often, Ontario’s discussion of the future focuses on urbanization, globalization and cities,” Fenn said. He warned against overlooking Ontario’s varied rural circumstances.



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“Issues in rural communities that are becoming suburbs are unlike those of communities in more remote locations,” he said. “The issues facing northern and eastern Ontario rural residents are often qualitatively different than those facing southwestern Ontario rural residents.

“Those engaged in agriculture have a different range of challenges than those involved in other aspects of the rural economy or professions,” Fenn added.

The ROI report built on a [2016 study](#) that Fenn conducted for the **Residential and Civil Construction Alliance of Ontario** identifying “megatrends” and implications for Ontario’s infrastructure. Fenn’s rural development report cited an infrastructure deficit that will require major investments and planning by governments at all levels.

Regarding future municipal structures, Fenn wrote favourably about areas of northern Ontario where no county-level municipalities exist. In those areas, district social service administrations provide a range of services outside urban centres.

Fenn also praised eastern Ontario's Prince Edward County which has "re-invented itself" as a single-tier municipality. In recent years, the county has moved away "from an economy dominated by traditional agriculture and declining population, but without abandoning its roots and its assets.

"Prince Edward reduced the number of municipalities both to expand the capacity and integration of local government ... to facilitate the adoption of a broad, common vision," Fenn said.

His ROI report also highlighted an economic development agreement among the mainly rural counties of Bruce, Grey and Huron with Bruce Power, a major nuclear power utility based in Bruce. The agreement sought to recruit and attract suppliers during the refurbishment of existing reactors which supply a large portion of Ontario's electrical power.

Fenn also praised the Eastern Ontario Wardens' Caucus for investments in high-speed broadband communications for their region.