

Stratford

Small towns can't afford independent policing, but don't know where to turn

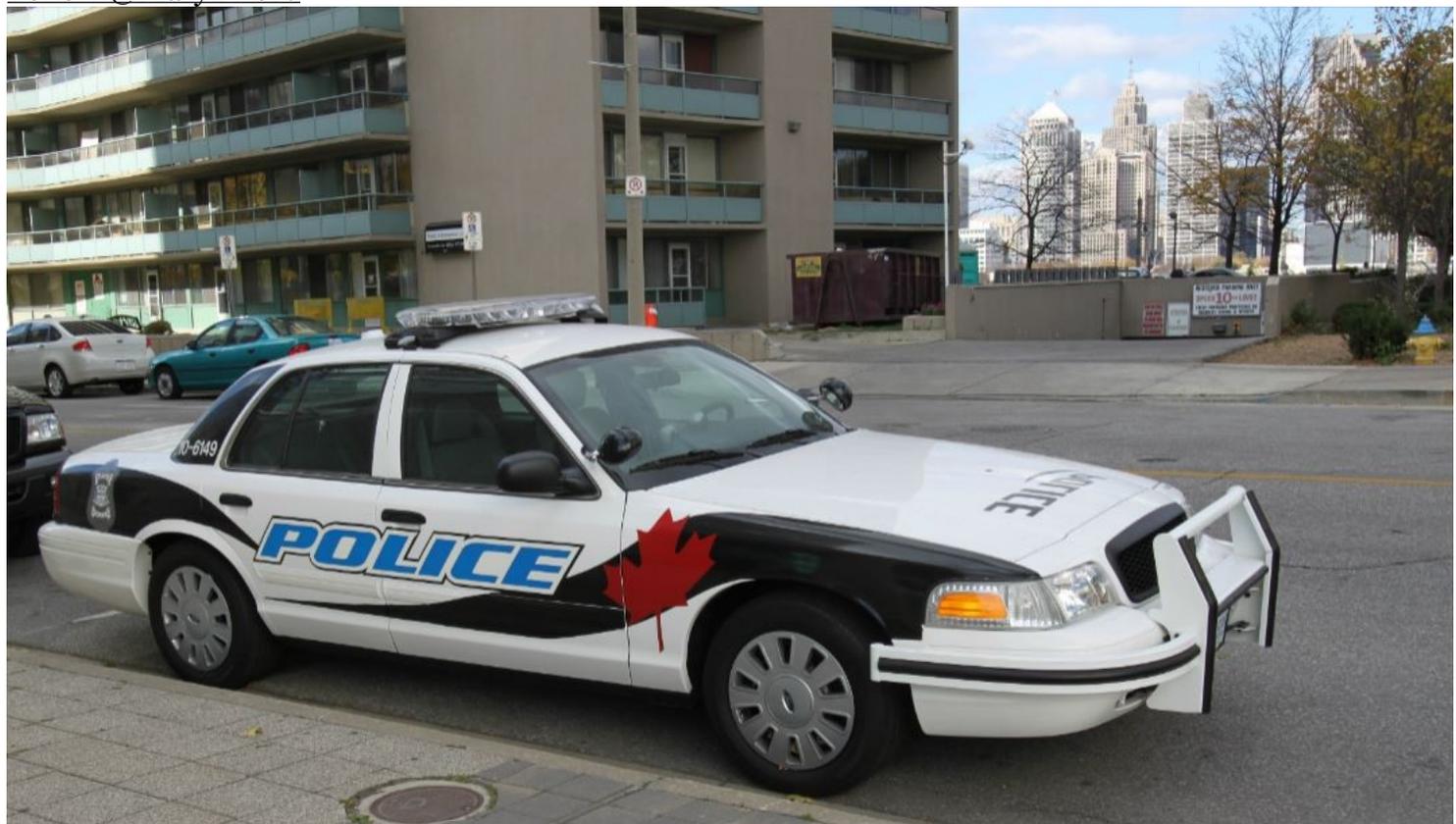
The OPP will provide local policing (and bill for it). Some municipalities would prefer a regional partner.

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To save money, the town of Amherstburg is exploring the option of merging its police force with Windsor's. (OZinOH/Creative Commons BY-NC 2.0)

LONDON — Four years ago, in the final days of his 36-year career with the Ontario Provincial Police, former commissioner Chris Lewis warned that the day of the small-town police force was numbered.

He argued that partnering with a larger police force puts a broader array of expertise

and services into the hands of a municipality – and within the reach of dwindling budgets.

Rural municipal governments across southwestern Ontario are reaching the same conclusion. Driven by a desire to provide policing at lower cost, the majority of the region's rural municipalities – including Norfolk, Haldimand, Huron, Middlesex, and Elgin counties – have contracted out their local policing needs to the OPP.

Recently, however, some municipalities in the region are exploring the possibility of rejecting the OPP and contracting the forces of their larger urban neighbours instead. The potential for saving money is a factor, they say. But equally important is the belief that partnering with neighbouring municipalities to create regional police forces – rather than the default solution of contracting policing out to the OPP – will do a better job of keeping a sense of community in small-town and rural policing.

St. Marys has used the OPP ever since it dismantled its own police force about 20 years ago. While there have been no major issues with the basic police services the OPP has provided, St. Marys Mayor Al Strathdee says the provincial police force has significantly reduced its visibility in the town of 7,200. At one time the town had its own sergeant, but when costs increased, a previous council cut the position. Now, it would cost an additional \$250,000 a year to reintroduce the position, he says.

Other irritations have emerged, too. The OPP's reports regarding local activities provide information at the Perth County level, rather than showing what's happening in St. Marys as a town. Council never gets response time data for calls – information it routinely receives from the local volunteer fire service and emergency dispatchers. And a decline in ticketing revenue reflected just how much the OPP routine presence in the town had dwindled, says Strathdee. He believes visibility is one of the most important aspects of community policing – “and that was something that seemed to be lacking.”

(The OPP responded to local criticisms about its commitment to community policing in a written response to TVO.org. It reads in part: “The OPP provides excellent policing services, and is confident the service it provides will be professional, adequately resourced, and of high quality. The OPP meets or exceeds all adequacy standards, which demonstrates the high level of policing excellence.”)

Now, St. Marys is finalizing a four- or five-year contract with the city of Stratford to provide policing. Stratford promises the basic services the OPP has provided, plus an officer regularly stationed in the town most of the time. The service will even use vehicles that combine the Stratford police's logo with that of St. Marys. The proposal also provides the possibility of introducing summer bicycle patrols using police cadets or students to establish an even greater on-street police presence.

Strathdee says for Stratford, the advantage in delivering the service is spreading out overhead costs. “If you buy five police cruisers it costs so much; if you buy 10 you get a

better deal.”

Initial estimates suggest St. Marys will benefit financially too. The first year with Stratford police will cost roughly \$80,000 more than the \$1,155,089 the municipality paid to the OPP in 2017. Each of the remaining years, however, the town’s bill will be nearly \$80,000 less than the 2017 amount.

The Stratford-St. Marys regional policing arrangement is expected to begin in June.

“This isn’t about saying the OPP is a bad police force because they’re not,” Strathdee says. “This is about resource allocation and being able to have a better say and more control over your local policing.

“This contract will be the closest thing we’ll get to [having] a local force again.”

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Perth South, population 4,000, also plans to contract its policing to Stratford. Again, expenses are a driving issue — but Perth South is not so much aiming to lower its policing costs; it simply wants them to be more predictable. “We have no control over the OPP as far as pricing,” says Robert Wilhelm, the municipality’s mayor. The OPP has policed the municipality for years but changes to the provincial service’s billing model in 2015 eliminated an annual 10 per cent rebate to Perth South. Costs continue to soar — and in a way that’s hard to predict, he says.

A four- or five-year contract with the Stratford service will give the municipality the room to predict costs — and while he doubts there will be any savings, Wilhelm anticipates more patrols: “We’re looking at having at least one cruiser 24/7 in our municipality, which we do not have with the OPP.”

Amherstburg, near Windsor, is mulling the possibility of replacing its police force with a contract with the Windsor Police Service. With the town’s service consuming a quarter to a third of the annual municipal budget, council wants to review the expenditure, says Mayor Aldo DiCarlo.

About three years ago, Amherstburg began to explore contracting the OPP, following in the footsteps of most other Essex County municipalities. DiCarlo says other

municipalities warned him to prepare for a reduction in service if a contract went ahead. “Not on a safety level obviously,” he says. But what other municipalities have told him is that there are limits to the OPP’s commitment to local policing. “The small community stuff like parades and other events — you’ll lose that community connection.”

Council therefore asked the provincial service if it could provide the services the municipality currently had, but for less money. “The OPP basically just refused to cost us,” he says, “because they said, ‘That’s not how we operate.’” (Since 2015 the provincial police service has maintained standardized prices for all of its services.

Council had also been interested in exploring a contract with the Windsor Police Service but the approach came with a problem: The two municipalities aren’t immediately adjacent. The province has typically required municipalities to share a border if they’re planning to amalgamate police services. And the town of LaSalle, sandwiched between Amherstburg and Windsor, has no interest in merging its police services with the others. “We’re very happy with our own service,” says Ken Antaya, LaSalle’s mayor.

Then Amherstburg town council learned of St. Marys precedent-setting success at obtaining provincial approval to contract services from Stratford. So the municipality approached the Windsor police and received a costing for “exactly” what the community had asked for, DiCarlo says.

Contracting with the Windsor police service won’t produce as great a saving as contracting with the OPP. Currently, the Amherstburg service costs each of its households \$658 a year. A five-year contract with the Windsor proposal would drop that cost to just under \$600 a year. (And a contract with Windsor would produce some other savings for the municipality, adds DiCarlo, such as \$3 million for the Amherstburg police’s long-term benefit costs.) By way of comparison, in 2014, Lewis estimated the OPP per household cost to be \$360.

Under the Windsor proposal, staffing levels would remain the same. The larger police service would also have greater resources to help address other issues arising from recent proposed changes to provincial policing legislation, such as tackling added municipal responsibilities for policing waterways.

If it merged its police force with Windsor’s, however, Amherstburg would lose its police board, and the Windsor service would replace the town’s chief and deputy chief positions with a superintendent.

DiCarlo was interviewed in the midst of community consultations and described a mixed response to the idea so far. Many residents fiercely defend the service that helped the community earn its top spot as Canada’s safest from 2010 to 2012, according to Statistics Canada crime severity index. Others wonder why it took this

long for the municipality to explore switching the police service.

Under the terms of the proposal, council must decide by the end of February. DiCarlo says there's a chance a council decision won't settle the matter once and for all: "Some residents have called for it [the proposal] to be on the ballot."

Residents of St. Marys and Perth South haven't always been enthusiastic about proposed changes to their policing structures either. Still, St. Marys Mayor Strathdee hopes regional policing will become a trend – and says the solution can work, but stresses a visible police presence in smaller population centres is key.

"The biggest thing in policing is boots on the ground. If there's cops that are seen, if there's things going on in the community, if the kids get to know the police and build up a relationship over a long period of time, less stuff happens and your community is safer."

CORRECTION – An earlier version of this article included Bruce County in a list of counties where municipal policing is contracted out to the OPP. In fact, Saugeen Shores, which is a municipality in Bruce County, is policed by the Saugeen Shores Police Service. We regret the error.

This is one in a series of stories about issues affecting southwestern Ontario. It's brought to you with the assistance of faculty and students from Western University's Faculty of Information and Media Studies.

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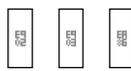
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