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How to Fix New Brunswick's Local Government Patchwork

By Jon Taylor and Zack Taylor

Local government in New Brunswick is a jerry-rigged product of 60 years of tinkering and half-measures. Despite nearly 30 in-depth studies and reports, its inherent problems remain unresolved: the democratic deficit in unincorporated areas, an inequitable distribution of tax burdens, uncontrolled sprawl near urban areas, and overcentralization of authority at the provincial level.

Luckily, the provincial government appears ready to take on these issues. The “Green Paper” released in April recognizes these problems and puts everything on the table. What is the best path forward?

We propose a solution in a new report, *Representative Regionalization*, published this week by Western University's Centre for Urban Policy and Local Governance.

Based on British Columbia's successful experience with flexible, bottom-up local governance through Regional Districts, we recommend modest changes that strengthen and democratize New Brunswick's Regional Service Commissions (RSCs). For almost 60 years, regional districts coordinated service planning and delivery across municipal boundaries and given an electoral voice to residents of unincorporated areas. The model is tried and true, and readily applicable to New Brunswick.

Representative regionalization would accomplish three goals:

- For the first time in generations, it gives a democratic voice to the 223,000 New Brunswickers—30% of the provincial population—who lack elected local representation and increases accountability for the taxing and spending decisions that affect them.
- It reduces incentives to inefficient sprawl in and around Moncton, Saint John, and other cities by strengthening regional planning and ensuring that servicing costs are fairly distributed.
- Most importantly, it unlocks the creativity of communities by strengthening local democracy and increasing local autonomy.

Our proposal requires three key changes. First, the province's existing 236 Local Service Districts would be replaced by democratically accountable representatives. Residents of unincorporated areas would directly elect members to RSC boards in proportion to their share of the population. These board members would sit alongside representatives of cities, towns, and villages as they make regional planning and servicing decisions. Second, unincorporated areas would be divided into “electoral areas” defined by communities of interest and participation in regional services. Third, RSCs would gain the authority to decide what services to provide, where they are offered, and the tax rates levied to pay for them.

These transformed RSCs would better serve all New Brunswickers, urban and rural alike, by being accountable, transparent, and equitable. To build consensus between large and small units, RSC board members would vote on a “rep by pop” basis. When making financial decisions, however, votes would be weighted to give greater influence to units with larger populations and tax bases. The number of board members and their voting strength for these weighted votes would also be revised every 10 years to reflect changes in population. These features would provide an incentive for communities of all shapes and sizes—urban or rural, incorporated or unincorporated—to democratically participate in decision making regarding land-use planning and service delivery at the most appropriate scale: the regional housing and labour market.

What are the alternatives? The province could choose to forcibly “municipalize” unincorporated areas and redraw municipal boundaries around the big cities. Past experience in New Brunswick and other provinces shows that this is often a costly and conflictual process that does not yield expected efficiencies. Our approach does not prevent voluntary municipalization, but it does not rely on it either.

British Columbia has proved this model can be effective. Learning from the regional district experience, representative regionalization would make local governance in New Brunswick more flexible, democratic, responsive, and accountable. It would better position New Brunswick’s many communities, and the province as a whole, to respond to the many difficult challenges they face, from economic decline to demographic change. And since most of the necessary pieces are already in place, including regional institutions and provincial tax collection, it would do so with less disruption than municipal amalgamation and restructuring. It is time for New Brunswick to put the pieces together.

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<https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/urbancentre-reports/5/>.