A Community Shaped by Land, History and People

25 Years of the City of Kawartha Lakes



The story of local government in what we now call Kawartha Lakes did not begin with council chambers or bylaws. It began with the land. Long before municipal boundaries were drawn, this region was defined by its lakes, rivers, forests, and wetlands: lands that sustained Indigenous peoples for generations and continue to shape life here today.

In the late 1700s, following the American Revolution, Loyalist Refugees arrived in British territory seeking stability and opportunity. Surveyors went ahead of the settlers, marking out lots, concessions, and townships as early as 1783. Lines were drawn through forests and along waterways, transforming these vast interconnected ecosystem lands into measured parcels.

When Upper Canada was created in 1791, governance took shape through geographically large and appointed districts. One of these, the Newcastle District, established in 1802, encompassed most of what is now Kawartha Lakes. Decisions for local communities were made in distant hubs such as Cobourg, by officials whom residents did not elect and probably never met.

The distance between decision-makers and the people they governed was not only physical; at this time there was also a significant gap in lived experience. Most administrators were not farmers, they were aristocrats. Yet, the seeds of change were already taking root.

The expansion of settlement came at a profound cost to Indigenous peoples. In 1818, the Mississaugas of Rice Lake entered into what became known as the Rice Lake Treaty, transferring more than 4,000 square kilometres of land to the British Crown in exchange for modest annual payments. The fairness of this agreement has long been questioned, and its impacts continue to be felt today. For many, this treaty represents a reminder of the loss of land, autonomy, and tradition. In 2018, a partial settlement acknowledged these unresolved truths, reminding us that history is not finished; it is still being lived and understood.

As European settlement increased, so too did the desire for local voice and accountability. People wanted a say in how their communities were managed, how roads were built, how services were delivered, and how their daily lives were shaped. The reform movements of the 1830s, led by Louis-Joseph Papineau representing Lower Canada (modern day Quebec and parts of Labrador) and Upper Canada (Ontario) represented by William Lyon Mackenzie, sought to change the undemocratic colonial governments of the time. Though marked by immense conflict, these reformations helped shape a new understanding of governance, one rooted in representation. The rebellions of 1837 insisted that the government should answer to the people it governed, and though it may have failed on the battlefield, it became the cornerstone that led to a more modern and local democracy.

In 1849, the Baldwin Act replaced the large appointed district councils with elected municipal governments. For the first time, residents had the power to choose their leaders and to shape the direction of their communities. In the Kawartha region, governance evolved through the United Counties of Peterborough and Victoria, and later through the County of Victoria, established in 1861. These early municipalities were more than political structures, they were communities working together to build and shape a shared future.

Over the following decades, these local councils built roads and bridges, managed water systems, supported schools, organized fire protection, and nurtured the institutions that formed the backbone of civic life. By the turn of the twentieth century, municipal government in Victoria County was stable, familiar, and deeply connected to its residents. Local councils were not abstract entities, they were neighbours working with neighbours.

The 20th century brought new challenges that tested the strength of this system. Economic hardship during the Great Depression strained municipal resources and demanded creative solutions. The post-war boom brought rapid growth, changing demographics, and increasing need for services. Municipalities were pushed to their limits; the province saw this and responded. By the latter half of the century, conversations turned toward restructuring and consolidation. Changes in the 1970s, including the addition of Manvers Township to Victoria County, set the stage for a transformative reform.

In the 1990s, Ontario embarked on sweeping municipal reorganization under the so-called Common Sense Revolution under Premier Mike Harris. The province's agenda was to streamline government, reduce costs, and create more efficient service delivery. The Victorian structures and limits of the old municipalities were struggling to adapt to modern demands, expectations, and costs of services. Through amendments to the Municipal Act, the map of Ontario was redrawn. More than 400 municipalities were merged into larger, single-tier structures.

This reorganization came to Victoria County in January 2001 with the merging of 18 townships to form a single-tier municipality: the City of Kawartha Lakes, now often just referred to as Kawartha Lakes. The change was significant, not simply administrative, but deeply personal for many residents. Not only did the government structure change, so did the name. Kawartha, derived from Anishinaabe words meaning "shining waters," honoured the land and its enduring presence. The word "City" sparked debate. For many, it felt out of place in a region defined by farms, villages, and shorelines. Yet it reflected a governance model rather than urban form, signalling a centralized approach designed to serve a large and diverse region. It was a new identity, built on legacy, and one that asked residents to see themselves not only as part of their own community, but as part of a broader whole.

The early years of amalgamation were challenging. Sixteen fire departments had to learn how to operate as one. More than 40 sets of bylaws were reviewed and merged. Budgets were aligned, and systems rebuilt.

In 2003, a referendum revealed strong public support for de-amalgamation. When the province declined to reverse its decision, it became clear that the task ahead was not to look back, but to move forward, together.

Eventually, shared services strengthened connections across communities and brought new opportunities. A city-wide library system linked residents through learning and culture, ensuring that knowledge and resources were available to everyone, regardless of distance. Thoughtful planning frameworks balanced growth with environmental stewardship, protecting sensitive areas such as the Carden Plain. The concept of Kawartha Lakes as a "community of communities" began to take hold as lived experience, not simply a slogan.

Governance continued to evolve. In 2017, council reduced its size to better reflect the needs of a modern municipality. The change, implemented in 2018, reflected a growing confidence in how the city governed itself.

As Kawartha Lakes entered the 2020s, it did so with clarity and purpose. Investments in infrastructure improved roads, bridges, water systems, and community facilities. Strategic plans set priorities around sustainability, economic opportunity, and housing. This includes a commitment to support the creation of 6,500 new homes by 2031, recognizing that growth, when guided thoughtfully, can strengthen communities.

The city's leadership also recognizes that progress must be balanced with preservation. Growth is embraced, but not at the expense of heritage. Rural character is protected, while modernization moves forward. Cultural initiatives, environmental stewardship, and public engagement continues to shape a shared civic identity, one rooted not in uniformity, but in respect for diversity.

Today, Kawartha Lakes stands at a meaningful milestone. The first 25 years of this new municipal structure have proven that change, even when difficult, can lead to something stronger.

"Kawartha Lakes stands on a solid foundation shaped over the last 25 years," said Mayor Doug Elmslie. "As a community of communities, we are well positioned for a future that strengthens what we've built together."

"The future of Kawartha Lakes is rooted in the strength built over the last 25 years," he continued. "Our community of communities has laid the groundwork for continued growth, connection, and opportunity."