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## Shifting Perceptions in Shrinking Cities: The Influence of Governance, Time and Geography On Local (In)Action

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### **Abstract:**

The ability of local planners and decision-makers to effectively manage population loss and economic decline has been limited by the availability of shrinkage strategies in the planning toolbox and the stigma of shrinkage within the growth-oriented culture of planning. This paper assesses applicability of a service rightsizing strategy in two shrinking Canadian municipalities in order to ascertain how local perception facilitates or impedes action. Although deemed theoretically applicable by the six key informants, the strategy was ultimately considered practically infeasible in both cities due to governance barriers. Despite similar conclusions, the local perception of shrinkage and response strategies was found to be influenced by the geographic location and longevity of shrinkage. The paper postulates that the duration of shrinkage processes and local perceptions are tied to the stage of deindustrialization and the changing demographic makeup of the city.

## **Introduction**

In social, economic and urban theory, decline has traditionally been perceived as simply a step in an evolutionary cycle (McKenzie 1924; P. Hall 1988; Hoover and Vernon 1959; Van den Berg et al. 1982). However, recent academic literature has consistently concluded that the emergent phenomenon of shrinking cities is a lasting symptom of globalization (Audirac, Fol, and Martinez-Fernandez 2010; Rink et al. 2012; Pallagst 2010; Rieniets 2006). There is agreement amongst planning academics and practitioners that planning, as it currently exists, is not equipped to manage shrinkage (Bernt et al. 2014). The literature identifies both cognitive and practical barriers to developing and implementing strategies that respond to the challenges of population loss without relying on the assumption of growth. Cognitively, Hollander et al. (2009) assert that the growth-oriented culture in which planners operate has produced an aversion to the very notion of shrinkage. Therefore a better and more nuanced understanding of local actors and practitioner perception is needed to advance and facilitate the development and application of alternative planning approaches in shrinking cities (Bernt et al. 2014). Pragmatically, the lack of alternative approaches in the planning toolbox is problematic considering the inapplicability of traditional growth strategies in the context of shrinkage (Hollander and Popper 2007; Wiechmann and Bontje 2013). Therefore strategies to manage demographic and economic transitions in order to maintain community viability and quality of life are necessary. This paper calls upon the practical literature as a means to advance our understanding of the cognitive barriers to developing and implementing non-growth strategies in shrinking cities. Two overarching questions guide this research: How do local decision-makers' perceptions of a theoretical shrinkage strategy differ from a practical one? How do governance, time and geography impact local decision-makers' perceptions of shrinkage in the Canadian context?

This paper focuses specifically on the applicability of a shrinkage strategy in the Canadian municipalities of Chatham-Kent, Ontario and Cape Breton Regional Municipality (CBRM), Nova Scotia in order to ascertain how local perception facilitates or impedes action (for research regarding agenda setting and the policymaking process in shrinking cities see Bernt et al. 2014). Simply put, key informant interviews regarding the applicability of a shrinkage strategy are used as a vehicle to better understand local decision-maker perceptions of shrinkage. Focusing on a theoretical planning intervention allows for an in depth discussion of the opportunities and barriers in shrinking cities while sidestepping potential bias and stigma, which have been shown to be an issue in shrinking communities (Beauregard 2003; Warkentin 2012). As there is little to no research on the development, applicability or perception of shrinkage strategies in the Canadian context, a systematic approach is undertaken to identify and adapt an international strategy to the case study communities. Key informant interviews are used to explore how local decision-makers in shrinking cities perceive the applicability of shrinkage strategies. Results are used to identify opportunities and barriers concerning the feasibility of shrinkage strategies. And commonalities and differences between the two case studies are explored to offer insight to the temporal and spatial influence of urban shrinkage on local perceptions. Although much of the theoretical discussion in this paper can be applied at a number of scales, the concentration will remain at the municipal level where the challenges of urban shrinkage are most often confronted.

### **Shrinking Cities**

Shrinking cities can be defined and operationalized in a range of different ways (Mallach 2017; Weaver et al. 2017; Ganning and Tighe 2018). However, the majority of shrinking cities definitions share two common indicators: population loss, and some representation of economic decline or transformation (Buhnik 2010; Rink et al. 2011; Wiechmann 2008). Many researchers

have explored the causes of shrinking cities, attributing the phenomenon to globalization, deindustrialization, political turmoil, demographic shifts, suburbanization, and even war and environmental disaster (Schatz 2010; Buhnik 2010; Wiechmann 2008; Bernt et al. 2012; Oswalt and Rieniets 2006). Similarly, the range of effects and challenges associated with urban shrinkage have been discussed at length. These include increased socio-economic inequality, high vacancy rate, downtown dilapidation, stretched and underserviced infrastructure, increased crime and much more (Soja 2000; Martinez-Fernandez et al. 2012; Zakirova 2010; Wiechmann and Pallagst 2012).

Population loss and economic decline are not new processes. Urban change has often been conceptualized as a natural cyclical process (Hoyt 1939; McKenzie 1924; Van den Berg et al. 1982). However, more recently researchers have argued that ‘globalization has altered the spatial scale at which economic and social changes occur and their manifestation at the local level’ (Hartt 2018b, 11). Economic, social and urban theories of urban change have evolved alongside the increasing impact of globalization (Appadurai 1996; Friedmann 1986; Hirst and Thompson 1996; Robertson 1992; Sassen 2001). Consequently, Martinez-Fernandez et al. (2012) contend that contemporary urban shrinkage is not simply a temporary stage of a natural cyclical process, but an enduring manifestation of globalization.

Globally, the shrinking cities discourse has gained considerable momentum over the past ten years and is now firmly established as a central research theme in both Europe and the United States (Audirac 2017). However, Canadian academics and professionals continue to be reluctant to explore urban shrinkage (Schatz 2010; Hartt 2016). Despite widespread acknowledgement of the uneven Canadian urban geography and emphatic calls for additional research (Filion 2010; Polèse and Shearmur 2006; Hartt 2018a), continuous growth is considered normal and declining urban areas overlooked (H. M. Hall and Hall 2008). Furthermore, policy analysis has found that Canadian municipalities tend to ignore and/or fail to accept the realities of urban shrinkage (Hartt and

Warkentin 2017). This study contributes to the Canadian shrinking cities discourse by examining the perceptions of local decision-makers and the propensity of Canadian actors to fail to accept urban shrinkage.

## **Case Studies**

Following Eisenhardt (1989), two distinctly different examples of shrinkage, one long-term and one short-term, are examined. This approach was selected in order to gain insight to the diverse Canadian urban landscape and contribute to a more differentiated understanding of local perceptions of urban shrinkage. To select the two case studies, the population and geographic size, governance structure, location and duration of shrinkage of the 39 Canadian municipalities that have experienced population decline in at least two of the last three census periods were compared. Chatham-Kent, ON and Cape Breton Regional Municipality (CBRM), NS were identified as the most comparable but markedly different shrinking municipalities. Both are single-tier regional governments, have populations of approximately 100,000 and cover roughly 2,500 square kilometers and have experienced losses in population and employment as their industrial-based economies have declined. However, CBRM is located on the eastern coast of the country far from the national economic engines and has been shrinking for approximately six decades, whereas Chatham-Kent is centrally located in Southern Ontario and has only been shrinking since 2006. The two case studies are examined in closer detail below.

### *Chatham-Kent, ON*

Population change in Chatham-Kent had already been stagnant prior to the amalgamation in 1998. No-growth and slow growth patterns persisted until 2006, however the population has steadily declined since – losing over 6500 residents by 2013 (Statistics Canada 2014). Over the

course of the same time period employment fluctuated, but generally grew, until 2006 when it also began to decline. Between 2006 and 2013 approximately 20% of the city's jobs were lost (Statistics Canada 2013b). An aging population compounded population and employment trends – the proportion of residents aged 65 and over has grown every single year since amalgamation and as of 2013 they represent almost 20% of the population (Statistics Canada 2014). Furthermore, the number of annual immigrants has fallen by 50% since amalgamation, despite the city's proximity to the Greater Toronto Area, which is home to almost 40% of Canadian immigrants (Statistics Canada 2013a).

Due to the municipality's geographic size and shrinking population, the cost of providing services has risen while the condition of existing infrastructure has worsened. Chatham-Kent's Asset Management Plan (Municipality of Chatham-Kent 2014) identified several current and impending service challenges. The Plan concluded that in order to fully fund and maintain services the municipality would need to reduce costs, and raise taxes and service rates. Sanitary and water rates would need to increase by over 50% each. Only a significant revenue increase or cost saving and divestment measures to eliminate the increasing infrastructure deficits could resolve the severe lack of funding combined with increasing demand for services (Municipality of Chatham-Kent 2014). Yet the new Official Plan makes no mention of divestment or consolidation of services (Municipality of Chatham-Kent 2015). Despite recent population and employment trends and the results of the Asset Management Plan, the Municipality plans for modest growth in multiple urban centers. Not only is there no discussion of consolidation, the Municipality plans to expand housing support services in both urban and rural areas to assist the municipality's aging population (Municipality of Chatham-Kent 2015).

*Cape Breton Regional Municipality, NS*

CBRM's population has been declining since 1961. The municipality has lost over 20,000 residents since amalgamation in 1995 (Statistics Canada 2014). The proportion of the population age 65 and over has increased every single year since at least 1986 (Statistics Canada 2014). Unlike Chatham-Kent, population trends are not clearly reflected by employment. Since amalgamation, absolute employment has remained relatively stagnant – meaning that the unemployment rate has actually decreased (Statistics Canada 2013b). However, unemployment rates in CBRM are much higher than both Chatham-Kent and the national average. In fact, in all but two years between amalgamation in 1995 and 2013 the unemployment rate in CBRM has been more than double that of the national average.

The Municipal Planning Strategy adopted in 2004 (and amended in 2013) recognized that the CBRM was 'evolving into a very inefficient landscape in which to provide municipal services' (Cape Breton Regional Municipality 2013, 4.30). The Strategy (p. 8.1) states that there are 'myriad examples where the existing infrastructure is woefully incapable of providing even an adequate level of service.' The coupling of a population that is both shrinking and spatially dispersing makes service provision especially difficult. The Municipality concluded that they could not continue to apply urban service solutions to rural servicing challenges and outlined a plan to establish service area boundary limits to minimize prohibitive capital and maintenance costs. However, a clear service boundary has yet to be established.

In 2013, CBRM Mayor Cecil Clarke appointed a citizen's task force to review and make recommendations for the organization and operation of the CBRM. Made up of local professionals and academics, the task force found that the Municipality was committed to the ineffective status quo and reluctant to consider major changes (Cape Breton Regional Municipality Task Force 2013). The task force concluded that the Municipality considered itself to be operating in an

efficient manner and that its financial issues were simply the result of a revenue problem. The task force disagreed and recommended that to offset expenditures the Municipality needed to confront its demographic reality with significant reorganization including the centralization of services.

Demographic and document analysis show that both CBRM and Chatham-Kent lack fiscal health. Without major changes, service expenditures in both municipalities will increase as their populations continue to age. Therefore both municipalities must reduce expenditures considerably and adapt services for a smaller, older population.

### **Shrinking City Strategies**

A systematic literature review was conducted to identify planning and economic development strategies for shrinking cities. Three approaches were used to find articles potentially containing strategies: (1) keyword searches (shrinking city, urban shrinkage) using research databases (Web of Science, Google Scholar, Scopus), (2) ‘snowballing’ (exploring references and references of references), and (3) document retrieval from government websites of shrinking municipalities, regions, and counties. Specific shrinking cities response strategies were identified through a methodical examination of the articles returned in the literature review. The title and abstract of the articles were read and if either explicitly or implicitly referred to shrinking response strategies, the article in its entirety was examined to locate strategy descriptions. Also, if the title and abstract review was inconclusive, the entire article was read. Although time-consuming, this approach was preferable to a keyword search as it allowed for the detection of subtler, implicit descriptions of urban shrinkage response strategies within the content of each article. It is important to note that the catalog of identified strategies is not exhaustive as the search was limited to English-language articles and reports. Therefore some articles and strategies may possibly have been overlooked. The resulting strategies were categorized according to six components: (1) strategy

type, (2) strategy goal, (3) funding type, (4) level of governance, (5) level of civic engagement, and (6) cost. The sub-categories of the six components are detailed in Table 2.

**Table 1: Summary of shrinking cities strategy types (adapted from Hummel (2014)).**

<b>Shrinking City Strategies</b>	
Land Banking	Aims to stabilize the housing market by acquiring and then either holding, managing, redeveloping or selling vacant/abandoned or tax-delinquent property.
Revitalization	Aims to physically redevelop key areas of the city with the ultimate goal of attracting new businesses and residents.
Demolition	Aims to match housing supply with demand by demolishing vacant/abandoned properties that cause problems or have alternate uses.
Consolidation	Aims to consolidate residents and shrink the physical footprint of the city to reduce infrastructure costs.
Greening	Aims to replace vacant land with green options such as trails, gardens, parks, etc. in order to lower crime, increase home values, and provide health benefits.

The strategy types, adapted from Hummel (2014) and summarized in Table 1, were land banking, revitalization, demolition, consolidation, greening and other. This is not an exhaustive list of possible strategies, but rather a reflection of the academic literature and government documents, which tend to focus on the physical built environment. The second component was strategy goal, which evaluates strategies based on the overarching objective of the intervention in relation to the population loss. Adapted from Hospers (2013), shrinking cities strategies can trivialize shrinkage by not addressing the symptoms, counter shrinkage by attempting to foster growth, accept shrinkage by adopting strategies to mitigate its negative effects or utilize shrinkage to explore unique opportunities associated with depopulation.

The third component examined funding type to determine if shrinking cities strategies are funded publicly, privately or in a public-private partnership. The fourth component examined the

level of governance involved in the strategy – intergovernmental, federal, provincial/state, municipal, sub-municipal, multi-level or none. The fifth component used the summary rungs of Arnstein’s ladder (1969) (citizen control, tokenism or nonparticipation) to assess the level of civic engagement. ‘Unclear’ and ‘Not Available’ were also included as the level of civic engagement can be difficult to evaluate depending on the source. The last component, monetary cost, is particularly difficult to evaluate, therefore fuzzy variables were used to estimate relative cost of different shrinking cities strategies. Although most strategies vary depending on the context and scale, some can be identified as having high (e.g. large infrastructure projects), medium (e.g. demolition projects) or low (e.g. community gardens) costs.

**Table 2: Six components used to categorize shrinking cities strategies identified in the literature.**

<b>Type</b> (Hummel 2014)	<b>Goal</b> (Hospers 2013)	<b>Funding</b>	<b>Level of Governance</b>	<b>Engagement</b> (Arnstein 1969)	<b>Cost</b>
Land banking	Trivialize shrinkage	Public	Intergovernmental	Citizen control	High
Revitalization	Counter shrinkage	Private	Federal	Tokenism	Medium
Demolition	Accept shrinkage	Public-private partnership	Provincial/state	Nonparticipation	Low
Consolidation			Municipal	Unclear	
Greening			Sub-municipal	Not available	
Other			Multi-level		
			Other		

### *Strategy Selection*

184 discussions of strategies (not mutually exclusive) in 65 different case study locations were identified and categorized. In order to match the mutual priorities of the two case studies, the

strategies were filtered to include only municipal-level public strategies with low or varying cost that accepted or utilized shrinkage. Of the 27 strategy discussions returned from the filtering process, revitalization and consolidation strategies were most prevalent. Although revitalization through brownfield development and temporary use of vacant land could be beneficial in Chatham-Kent and CBRM, they do not match the priority of achieving fiscal health outlined in the Case Study section. Consolidation strategies to rightsize infrastructure, services and municipal boundaries are more likely to help reduce costs and achieve fiscal health. Hummel (2014) describes rightsizing as a city's attempt to balance their built environment with their population by engaging in a process to match available resources with current demand without waste. Due to their similar industrial and manufacturing-based economies, the rightsizing experiences of Youngstown, Detroit and Flint were used to create a rightsizing strategy for Chatham-Kent and CBRM.

Adapting planning strategies from different contexts is inherently complex. However, as explained above, the dearth of Canadian shrinkage strategies necessitates external plans. Of foreign contexts, the American urban built environment and planning experience is arguably quite close to its northern neighbor. Reese's (2006) comparison of the Canadian and American municipal contexts found that cities in both countries respond to the local fiscal challenges of global economic trends through similar economic development strategies and policies. And although planning is generally more accepted in Canada due to the strong American stance on private property rights, the cities on either side of the border share the same organization and approach of economic development and planning (Reese 2006). Research has shown parallel patterns of population loss in Canada and the US, with the latter generally depopulating at a faster rate with more visible signs of decline (Hollander et al. 2018). One key difference impacting the extent of shrinkage and the development of municipal strategies is the tendency for Canadian cities to amalgamate with surrounding towns (Hartt and Warkentin 2017).

Due to the magnitude of population loss and dire financial straits, rightsizing strategies in Detroit, Youngstown and Flint were relatively low-cost, municipally-controlled, publicly-funded efforts to accept shrinkage. Weak, even strained, city-state relationships necessitated a relatively low-cost strategy with local governmental autonomy. While federal funds were made available for demolition in Flint, the *Imagine Flint 2013* master plan noted the need to aggressively pursue additional incremental funding opportunities (City of Flint 2013). So while funding may be multi-level and involve partnerships, the overarching plan is clearly municipally driven. Citizen engagement has proven to be a key factor in the acceptability of rightsizing strategies. Extensive public consultation was seen to being instrumental to the success of the *Youngstown 2010* plan (Schatz 2010). However, despite an extensive participatory campaign for *Detroit Future City* that included ‘hundreds of meetings, 30,000 conversations, connecting with people over 163,000 times, over 70,000 survey responses and comments from participants’ (Detroit Works 2012), citizens in Detroit still felt that the decision for planned relocation was made without their input. Kirkpatrick (2015, 273) contends that to make ‘Detroit a smaller, greener and more equitable city, the remnants of the community must be identified and acknowledged as key stakeholders in the democratic process of reshaping urban space.’

Rightsizing in Detroit, Youngstown and Flint was largely focused on the physical consolidation of the municipal footprint along with the rightsizing of infrastructure and services. In Chatham-Kent and CBRM, the oversized municipal footprint is partially due to shrinkage, but is also the result of significant amalgamation. Consequently the outlying rural areas of the municipalities are less dependent on urban services than depopulated areas of the American cities cited above. Because both Chatham-Kent and CBRM recently went through costly and tumultuous amalgamation processes, it is unlikely that the physical consolidation of the municipal boundary and displacement of citizens would be politically or socially acceptable. However, many of the

principles from the rightsizing literature and lessons from the American examples can be amended to match the needs of Chatham-Kent and CBRM.

A service rightsizing strategy could include a combination of: (1) consolidation of water and sewer services, (2) consolidation of infrastructure through closure of roads, bridges and culverts, (3) centralization of public amenities through closure of facilities such as library and recreation facilities, and (4) consolidation of public transit service. The overarching objective of the strategy is consistent with the literature and US examples: to minimize expenditures and increase the quality of service in densely populated areas. Both Chatham-Kent and CBRM have excess, underused and deteriorating infrastructure and are providing urban services to rural communities. Moreover both municipalities still carry significant infrastructural and service redundancies resulting from amalgamation and a subsequent reluctance to centralize. Similar to the cases of Detroit, Youngstown and Flint, there is a clear need to accept shrinkage rather than attempting to trivialize or counter it. Therefore a strategy to systematically rightsize municipal services and infrastructure would decrease public spending while providing improved and cost-effective services to a consolidated area. Although not as dire as recently-bankrupt Detroit, the relative low cost of the strategy is important for the two under-financed, overstretched regional municipalities. Municipal-provincial relationships may not be as strained as the city-state ties in the US, but the CBRM, for one, cannot lean too heavily on the have-not province of Nova Scotia for support. The experience of Detroit provides a clear message to policymakers and planners regarding the importance of genuine, continuous civic engagement. Both population loss and service reductions are difficult, loaded topics and therefore the community must play a significant and ongoing stakeholder role in any rightsizing strategy. In the following sections, the social, political and stakeholder acceptability of a service rightsizing strategy in Chatham-Kent and the CBRM are examined through key informant interviews.

## **Strategy Applicability**

Based on Buffett et al. (2011), Williams et al. (2014) and Rose (1993, 2005, 1991), the theoretical applicability of the selected strategy was assessed across five criteria: political acceptability, social acceptability, stakeholders, institutional infrastructure, and available resources. Key informant interviews with local decision-makers in each community were used to gauge local perspectives on shrinkage, rightsizing and the local social and political climate. Three semi-structured interviews and several follow-up interviews were conducted with key informants from planning, economic development and social housing departments in both Chatham-Kent, ON and CBRM, NS. The small size of the planning, economic development and social housing departments in the case study cities limited the sample of potential informants. However, this limitation is offset by the seniority (both in terms of rank and longevity of municipal service) of the recruited individuals. In both Chatham-Kent and CBRM, senior municipal employees from the planning and economic development departments were interviewed. Additionally, interviews with a senior municipal employee from the social housing department in Chatham-Kent and a senior employee from a social housing nonprofit in CBRM were conducted. The interview instrument was built around the five criteria of strategy applicability detailed above. In addition to asking about the theoretical application of the strategy, each key informant was also asked about the practical applicability. The conclusion of each interviewee on each component is summarized in Table 1.

**Table 3: Summary of key informant assessment ('✓' denotes that the strategy was considered applicable, 'X' denotes that it was not considered applicable and '-' that no conclusive statement was made).**

<b>Informant</b>	<b>Chatham-Kent</b>			<b>CBRM</b>		
	Planning	Economic Development	Social Housing	Planning	Economic Development	Social Housing
Political Acceptability	✓	✓	X	✓	✓	✓
Social Acceptability	✓	✓	X	X	X	✓
Stakeholders	✓	X	X	X	X	✓
Existing Institutional	✓	✓	✓	X	X	-
Available Resources	✓	✓	-	X	✓	✓
<b>Practical Applicability</b>	X	✓	X	X	X	X

### *Political Acceptability*

The planning and economic development informants in Chatham-Kent both felt that a service rightsizing strategy would generally match political priorities and be politically acceptable. However, they both noted that representatives have been unwilling to concede to consolidation in their own wards despite a general agreement to increase the efficiency of municipal services. The social housing informant felt that the politicians' pragmatic reluctance to consolidation overshadowed their general acceptability. The likelihood of not being re-elected was considered to be simply too high in the current ward system.

All three informants in CBRM stated that a service rightsizing strategy was in line with political priorities. According to the social housing informant:

'... a good percentage of the councilors do have a lot of trust and faith in the mayor so I think that if this was a direction that he and his administrative staff wanted to pursue, I think he would have the majority of support from the councilors' (CBRM social housing informant).

The planning informant in CBRM also highlighted the mayor's influence - 'when the CAO of your corporation [the mayor] is a chartered accountant, there's a bottom line, right?' The economic development informant in CBRM believed that 'the provincial government and administrators appear to be very much in support of rightsizing communities and regions that are in decline.' Although there may be political acceptability, the economic development informant added 'there is opposition locally to such decisions because people understand the profound impacts that rightsizing will have and that decline tends to beget further decline.'

### *Social Acceptability*

The social housing informant in Chatham-Kent also believed that 'many vocal people oppose cuts to services to their area', which would render any service rightsizing strategies socially unacceptable. Although the planning informant recognized that losing certain 'traditional services' might cause an issue, 'generally the public... would be supportive if it meant a better financial position for the municipality.' The economic development informant believed that as service rightsizing will 'happen over time by necessity', social acceptability would continue to increase over time as the older generation passes while 'the new generation really won't appreciate the argument having not lived through it.'

The social housing informant in CBRM thought that a service rightsizing strategy would be socially acceptable if the Municipality engaged in a transparent meaningful dialogue with the community members 'in a way that felt supportive and people felt like they were heard and seen.' In contrast, the planning informant in CBRM believed that 'as a concept they [the public] would laud it, but when they would see how it personally affects them they wouldn't.' The economic

development informant advocated that a service rightsizing strategy would be ‘beyond anything that would be acceptable to citizens.’

### *Stakeholders*

The economic development informant in Chatham-Kent believed that service rightsizing strategies would be ‘resisted by any group affected’, which would inhibit the intervention as ‘council tends to cave generally to the group concerns.’ The social housing informant felt that rightsizing would intensify the already existing rural-urban divide and, as such, be resisted by stakeholder groups outside of the urban center. However, the planning informant believed that stakeholders could be supportive if it could better the financial position of the Municipality.

The planning and economic development informants in CBRM highlighted probable conflicts with developer, university union, parents’ organizations and teachers’ associations depending on the type of service rightsizing. However, the social housing informant did not think that stakeholder conflict would be significant.

### *Existing Institutional Infrastructure*

All three informants in Chatham-Kent felt that there were no existing institutional infrastructure barriers impeding the adoption of a service rightsizing strategy. All three emphasized the fact that the idea of infrastructure and service consolidation has been a key part of the institutional framework since amalgamation in 1998. The need to cut, re-locate and combine services is well established.

According to both the planning and economic development informants in CBRM, a service rightsizing strategy would contradict existing policies and actions - pointing to recent large infrastructure investments. The planning informant explained how water and sewer infrastructure

had expanded post amalgamation and that further expansion is anticipated. Additionally the Municipality recently constructed new wastewater and sewer treatment plants and distribution systems. The economic development informant noted the conflict between infrastructure expansion and population shrinkage:

‘On the one hand CBRM is being encouraged [by federal and provincial governments] to spend heavily on new infrastructure that is obsolete once it is constructed due to the population decline and on the other CBRM is being encouraged to rightsize in all areas of its operation’ (CBRM economic development informant).

#### *Available Resources*

In Chatham-Kent, both the planning and economic development informants felt that the Municipality had adequate resources to adopt a service rightsizing strategy. In CBRM, the social housing and economic development informants also believed that the Municipality had adequate resources, however the planning informant felt that it would be difficult to implement without higher level government enforcement.

#### *Practical Applicability*

Whereas the economic development informant in Chatham-Kent recognized consolidation of infrastructure as a necessity, the social housing informant ultimately felt it was not an appropriate strategy moving forward. The planning informant felt that political restructuring would be required before the strategy could be adopted.

The planning informant in CBRM also pointed to governance issues. The informant felt that cooperation and incentive for rightsizing from the federal and provincial governments would

be necessary for the adoption of a service rightsizing strategy. The economic development informant did not feel that the strategy was applicable in CBRM:

‘...the biggest issue for me...is that at that point you've kind of given up on stabilizing and growing your economy. I think it's a huge signal to everybody that you're planning retreat. You're trying to plan decline and I think that's a fool's errand myself because I just think that's - I think it's ridiculous’ (CBRM economic development informant).

And although the social housing informant had stated that social acceptability could be attained for local action, it was felt that the unequal distribution of provincial funds would prove to be a significant barrier against the applicability of adopting a service rightsizing strategy.

Ultimately, all three key informants from CBRM deemed the service rightsizing strategy to be practically infeasible, despite being theoretically applicable. In Chatham-Kent, the planning and social housing informants also felt the strategy would not be feasible in their community, however, the economic development informant thought that it was and that ‘consolidation of infrastructure is kind of a mandatory thing we have to do.’

## **Discussion**

The service rightsizing strategy was considered to match an existing municipal need and deemed theoretically applicable by all six key informants. However, the three informants in CBRM and two of three in Chatham-Kent felt it was not currently practically applicable. The informants’ conclusions from the two municipalities may have been generally consistent, but it can be argued that they stemmed from considerably different perspectives of shrinkage.

To informants in Chatham-Kent, it seemed service rightsizing was an extension of amalgamation and a necessity for moving forward. There was little negativity connected with the concept, as it was generally regarded as a means to centralization and ultimately growth, rather than adaptation to shrinkage. Leftover infrastructure, overstretched services and outmoded governance structures were all seen to be enduring symptoms of amalgamation that would eventually disappear by necessity over time. In CBRM there was a reluctance to change. Although informants in CBRM recognized the municipality's inefficiencies, they seemed to believe that service rightsizing might only further accelerate decline. Generally, informants in Chatham-Kent saw inefficient, excess infrastructure and services as a hindrance to growth, whereas in CBRM the informants saw them as manifestations of population loss and economic decline. This section first explores the role of governance in impeding the perceived applicability of the service rightsizing strategy and then discusses how time and geography have led to the contrast in perspective between the two municipalities.

### *Governance*

The strained relationship between local and higher levels of government was a recurring theme and point of contention in the CBRM interviews. Wray and Stephenson (2012) argue that the withdrawal of federal and provincial funding for resource-based industries and subsequent failure to support 'losing' communities in CBRM produced conditions of immiseration. The planning informant felt that the provincial and federal governments should provide incentive for the municipality to consolidate services. And according to the social housing informant the CBRM did not receive appropriate funding from the provincial and federal government. This cynicism of government has manifested in a reluctance to consolidate services or infrastructure due to fear that the savings will not be returned.

The Chatham-Kent informants recognized the potential for a service rightsizing strategy to advance the transition, but also highlighted governance barriers. Unlike CBRM, the governmental barriers were local as opposed to provincial or federal. The planning informant felt that the service rightsizing strategy was politically and socially acceptable, had no conflict with local stakeholders or existing institutional infrastructure and that the municipality had the available resources to implement it. However, the informant ultimately decided that the strategy was not practically applicable due to the current governance structure. Although the informant felt that the strategy was generally in line with political priorities, changes to the electoral wards would be needed to successfully implement the strategy. The amalgamation, forced by the Province of Ontario in 1998, was clearly still a contentious and frustrating issue. The economic development informant noted the enduring impact of amalgamation, ‘our council is populated by many councilors that came from those areas so they'll never get over it until they leave. It's a shame because it kind of holds progress back.’

Governance structures and elected officials from the pre-amalgamation era obstructing progress was a recurring theme in the interviews. This is an issue held by the wider community as well, as evidenced by the current efforts to revisit ward boundaries in the municipality (Robinet 2015). Although the social housing informant did recognize the efforts of councilors to protect their communities and neighborhoods within Chatham-Kent, they were generally seen as a hindrance to progress and growth. And even though the planning informant and social housing informant did not think that a service rightsizing strategy is currently applicable, they both did feel it was, to some extent, inevitable.

## *Time*

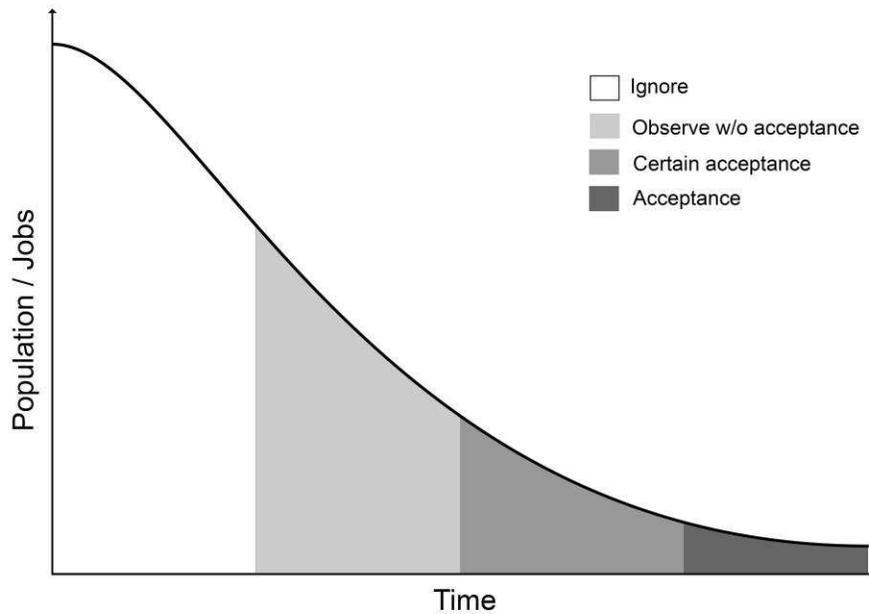
Shrinkage has been present in CBRM for six decades. Two generations of citizens have been born and raised surrounded by industrial decline, out migration and, in many ways, defeat. Closures in the mining, steel and fishing industries have had led to poor social cohesion, high poverty rates and widespread health issues (Wray 2012). Due to this long history of shrinkage, individual and collective confidence has waned and, as a result, decision-makers view change through a lens of decline (Wray and Stephenson 2012). There is little historic precedent demonstrating reward for consolidation in CBRM, which has contributed to its negative association and the general reluctance to contract services. The economic development informant likened rightsizing strategies to ‘almost communist-like control in a democratic country.’

In contrast, Chatham-Kent has only recently begun to shrink. Despite projections indicating continued population loss and aging, the brevity of the municipality’s decline has allowed considerable optimism to remain. All three informants were aware of the demographic and economic decline, but generally saw it as a temporary stage of economic restructuring and as a time to shift to new economic opportunities.

The contrast in opinions between informants in Chatham-Kent and CBRM supports the notion that perceptions of shrinkage change over prolonged periods of population loss and economic decline. Farke (2005) categorizes changes in shrinkage perception into four phases: (1) ignoring, where shrinkage is perceived as a temporary transition, (2) observation without acceptance, where shrinkage is recognized but not accepted, (3) certain acceptance, where top-down initiatives are considered to manage decline, and (4) acceptance, where conventional growth strategies are no longer implemented.

Figure 1 depicts changes in local perception over time in relation to the progression of urban shrinkage. Together Farke’s theory, evidence from the two case studies examined in this paper and

the wider shrinking cities literature indicate that shrinkage perception is tied to both principal characteristics of urban shrinkage – population loss and economic restructuring. Specifically, the shrinkage curve in Figure 1 can be seen as a representation of deindustrialization and the changing socioeconomic makeup of the population. It is important to note that the employment and population paths described are not an inevitable result of deindustrialization or population loss. The shape of the curves and the duration of the processes will be unique to the local context contingent on a wide range of contributing factors.



**Figure 1: Changes in local perception over time in relation to the progression of population/job loss.**

If we consider the y-axis to be absolute employment in a region largely dependent on the industrial sector, then time = 0 would mark the onset of deindustrialization. Following Farke (2005), the employment curve first passes through the phase of ignoring. If employment continues to drop, decision-makers are forced to take notice and the perception shifts to observation without

acceptance. But if employment losses decrease and deindustrialization leads to the tertiarization of the job market, the perception of shrinkage moves to certain acceptance. And finally if employment stabilizes (with a lower median income), decision-makers may feel that they have exhausted alternatives and therefore are compelled to accept shrinkage.

If we consider the y-axis to be population, a similar evolution may take place as young, educated and mobile citizens move from the city. If the population continues to decline, the proportion of older and vulnerable citizens increases causing a growing gap between tax revenue and service expenditures. If eventually population loss begins to stabilize, as only those who will not or cannot leave remain, decision-makers may feel that they have no other recourse but to accept shrinkage and adopt strategies representing their demographic reality.

The ongoing deindustrialization process in Chatham-Kent is relatively new and, as such, shrinkage has not been accepted. However, the employment and population loss has been significant enough for decision-makers to officially recognize shrinkage (observation without acceptance). The stabilization of employment in CBRM indicates the tertiarization of the job market and it is clear that the informants have a certain acceptance of shrinkage. Considering the decades of CBRM's economic and demographic decline, it is surprising that shrinkage has yet to be fully accepted. The following subsection speculates that perhaps geography, as well as time, contributes to the perception of shrinkage, and accordingly, the perceived applicability of shrinkage strategies.

### *Geography*

Chatham-Kent is located in southwestern Ontario. Although the surrounding region has also experienced shrinkage, its proximity to the United States, the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) and the Greater Golden Horseshoe cannot be underestimated. Not only does Chatham-Kent benefit

from the economic power of the GTA and trade routes to the US, but also from the influx of immigrants to the nearby area.

In contrast, the CBRM's misgivings regarding the effectiveness government and reluctance for change can be seen to stem from its relative isolation. Wray (2012) concluded that the economic and social effects of deindustrialization in Cape Breton have been seriously exasperated by its geographic isolation. CBRM is located on the eastern edge of Canada, far from the economic power of southern Ontario, the oil and gas of Alberta and Pacific Rim trade of Vancouver. Furthermore, within the province CBRM located relatively far from the provincial capital of Halifax (approximately 410 km), adding to the feeling of isolation and distance from higher levels of government. Without any nearby economic centers, the municipality has to rely on its own economic power to sustain the entire region. The geographic isolation of CBRM makes retaining young educated citizens difficult and attracting migrants even more so.

Perhaps in addition to the duration of shrinkage, geography or distance also contribute to the perception of shrinkage and therefore the type and willingness of local action. Research on agglomeration economics has established the increased importance of proximity in the modern economy (Glaeser 2011). Through their examination of the relationship between information technology, distance and innovation, Glaeser and Ponzetto (2007) concluded that the 'death of distance' strengthened centers of innovation (such as New York) and hindered industrial and manufacturing cities (such as Detroit). Despite improved communication technology, physical isolation has become an increasing economic burden. Furthermore, Bernt (2009) argues that the lack of resources in shrinking cities have impeded their ability to shift from managerialism to entrepreneurialism, inherently making shrinking cities relatively risk averse.

Considering the importance of cooperation and communication between multiple levels of government in stabilizing urban shrinkage (Rink et al. 2012), increased distance between local

decision-makers and their higher-level counterparts could weaken perceived and real relationships. Together distance from economic and governmental centers could cause peripheral shrinking cities, such as CBRM, to perceive themselves to be economically self-dependent and underrepresented by higher levels of government leading to a reluctance to fully accept shrinkage or adopt new strategies. Empirical research examining the relationship between geographic isolation of shrinking cities and the wariness of higher-level government and a reluctance initiate municipal change would provide important insight to the conceptualization of peripheral shrinking cities and practical approaches to their challenges.

## **Conclusion**

The deficiency of alternative approaches in the planning toolbox (Hollander and Popper 2007) combined with the stigma of shrinkage within the growth-oriented culture of planning (Hollander et al. 2009) has limited the ability of local planners and decision-makers to effectively manage population loss and economic decline (Bernt et al. 2014). This paper contributes to the conceptual understanding and practical advancement of urban shrinkage by (1) identifying context-specific opportunities and barriers to the applicability of shrinkage strategies in Chatham-Kent and CBRM, and (2) exploring the relationship between perceptions of urban shrinkage, time and space.

Municipal amalgamations and shrinking populations have left both Chatham-Kent and CBRM with excess infrastructure and overstretched services. A service rightsizing strategy was assessed as an approach to regaining fiscal health by minimizing municipal expenditures and augmenting quality of service in the urban core. Although the strategy was deemed to be theoretically applicable by all six key informants, five of six informants did not feel it was practically applicable in the current context of their municipalities. Governance issues were the principal barrier in both municipalities as an outmoded ward system within the local government

of Chatham-Kent and disenchantment with the role of federal and provincial government in CBRM were considered to be impeding consolidation.

This paper postulates that the reluctance to adopt a service rightsizing strategy stemmed from different outlooks in the two municipalities. Shrinkage in Chatham-Kent is a relatively new phenomenon and, as such, appears to be viewed as a temporary stage in the growth cycle despite continued decline. This can be categorized as ‘observation without acceptance’ in Farke’s (2005) phases of shrinkage perception. Informants saw service rightsizing as a necessary pre-cursor to growth, but that current municipal governance structure would impede any useful progress. In contrast, CBRM has been shrinking for six decades, which has resulted in a distrust of government action and a reluctance to change. Service rightsizing was associated with defeat and a disbelief that it could result in positive change. The perception of shrinkage in CBRM can be classified as ‘certain acceptance.’

From the demographic and employment trends in the two case studies, this paper theorizes that changes in perception of shrinkage are closely tied to the stages of deindustrialization and changes to the makeup of the population. In both cases, a propensity to ‘ignore’ and ‘observe without acceptance’ last until population or employment decline begins to stabilize due to the exodus of mobile citizens or the tertiarization of the job market. The longevity of population decline and economic restructuring influences the stage of deindustrialization and migration, and therefore plays a vital role in the local perception of, and subsequent action in response to, urban shrinkage. Such perceptions could result in the adoption of overly optimistic growth strategies in newly shrinking areas or, coupled with geographic isolation, the reluctance to change the status quo in long-term shrinkage areas. Awareness of the influence of longevity and geography could help bridge practical and cognitive gaps between decision-makers in different levels of government. It is crucial, in both case studies, that strong relationships between local, provincial, and federal actors

are established and maintained. The need for transparency and communication is especially prevalent in CBRM, where decades of failed policy and perceived slights undermine progress.

Although the policy transfer of the rightsizing strategy was solely used as a vehicle to examine local decision maker perceptions of shrinkage in this study, it is important to note the complex practical implications and power dynamics of these tools. While the ideals of rightsizing are compelling and laudable, Hackworth (2015) demonstrated that in practice rightsizing has largely failed to integrate socially just processes. He contends (2015, 780) that actualized rightsizing is simply an attempt to convert ‘the most expensive parts of the territorial social economy into a new investment opportunity.’ Similarly, policy transfer can be used as a manipulative tool by powerful actors, rather than a process to locate and inspire best practices. Peck (2011) describes the acceleration of policy cycles, the implications of ‘fast-policy’ regimes, and advocates for a policy mobility and mutation approach. He argues (2011, 774) that when considering a more constitutive sociospatial context of policy-making activities, ‘the movement of policy is more than merely a transaction or transfer, but entails the relational interpenetration of policy-making sites and activities.’ Therefore when considering policy mobility or rightsizing strategies in shrinking communities, decision-makers should heed Hollander and Németh’s (2011) recommendation to ground processes, decisions and evaluations in principles of fairness and equity.

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