As Toronto’s municipal election campaign begins to take shape, the city’s 15-year old amalgamation still looms large.

A new report by the Institute on Municipal Finance and Governance looks at the legacy of amalgamation in Toronto and Montréal. In both cases, the Province pursued restructuring as a means of reducing the number of local governments and politicians and finding efficiencies and cost savings.

We evaluated the legacies of both amalgamations based on four criteria: efficiencies and cost savings, service levels and tax burden, accountability and local responsiveness, and regional coordination. There is little evidence of efficiencies and cost savings in either city. In Toronto, we found that expenditures on many of the lower-tier services that were merged, such as fire and garbage, actually increased after amalgamation. There was limited scope for savings in the first place, as many of the city’s largest expenditures—welfare, transit and policing—were already the responsibility of the upper-tier government (Metro Toronto).

However, we did find that there was greater equity in the distribution of services and tax burden across Toronto, although this has not been the case in Montréal. Prior to amalgamation, the municipalities of York and East York were experiencing declining tax bases and lower service levels than Metro Toronto’s other lower-tier municipalities. Amalgamation likely increased the level of services for residents in these two areas, resulting in increased equity.

Finally, local accountability has probably improved in Toronto while responsiveness has likely diminished. The number of political representatives in Toronto has significantly decreased, falling from 106 elected officials under Metro Toronto to 58 in the new City of Toronto and subsequently to the 45 we have now. As each elected representative has far more constituents, we can assume that citizens have less access to decision-makers. Additionally, community councils—a structure put in place to ensure local responsiveness in the wake of consolidation—have been reduced and each is now the size of a large city. While responsiveness to citizens has likely diminished, there has been a strengthening of institutional accountability mechanisms, with the creation of accountability officers, a lobbyist registry and a Code of Conduct.

While amalgamation was hugely unpopular in Toronto, little has been done to reverse or amend the restructuring process. In Montréal, local resentment led to de-amalgamation referenda that reversed the reforms in some former municipalities, and forced the creation of an upper-tier ‘agglomeration’ government to coordinate the messy governance arrangement on the island.

Still, perhaps the most important legacy of the amalgamations in both cities was the failure to address regional issues. In Toronto, amalgamation failed to tackle the need for planning and coordination across the broader metropolitan region, with the ‘Megacity’ representing only about half of the population of the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area, with growth and service responsibility spilling over into the surrounding large, fast-growing suburban municipalities. In Montréal, the situation was similar. The provincial government attempted to bridge this gap by creating the Communauté Métropolitaine de Montréal, a regional body that serves 82 municipalities in and around the city and has broad jurisdiction for coordinating a range of economic, social, environmental and transportation services.

Today, Toronto remains too small to tackle big regional issues. The GTHA is highly fragmented, with 26 municipalities of varying shapes and sizes, each with unique economic and demographic characteristics, challenges and political dynamics. No GTHA-wide governance body exists to enable planning and decision-making among these municipalities, and with the other orders of government. Metrolinx, a special-purpose agency created to plan the regional transportation network and operate the GO commuter network, has been hamstrung by a lack of financial tools and the absence of a regionally representative, accountable mechanism for GTHA decision-making.

The upcoming municipal election campaign will focus heavily on issues like transportation, infrastructure, growth planning and economic development—all of which need to be coordinated across the broader region. But ultimately, the city and the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area municipalities will continue to struggle in planning,
TORONTO BRIEFS

On successful regional transportation systems
Complaints about transit can draw just about any two Torontonians together in mutual ire. It’s widely acknowledged that our population is growing much faster than our transit system, so The Neptis Foundation and the Toronto Region Board of Trade are teaming up to bring former Transport for London board member and designer David Quarmby to the Toronto to talk about his successes in London.

Transport for London is responsible for the vast majority of transportation planning and operations in Greater London and

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ICONIC BLOOR STREET

“While we will be tracking attendance at each of the cultural destinations, as well as visits to the websites and social media activity. When we run special promotions, we will track both interest and attendance directly generated by the promotion. We are also hoping to work with the local BIAs to track increases in economic activity along this stretch of Bloor Street.”

The Bloor Street Culture Corridor organizations from east to west are Bloor Hot Docs Cinema, Tafelmusik Baroque Orchestra and Chamber Choir, Toronto Consort, Miles Nadal Jewish Community Centre, Native Canadian Centre of Toronto, Alliance Française de Toronto, Instituto Italiano di Cultura, Royal Conservatory of Music, Royal Ontario Museum, Gardiner Museum, Bata Shoe Museum, and Japan Foundation. They are working together with community partners including the Bloor-Yorkville BIA, Bloor-Annex BIA, Tourism Toronto, Ontario Arts Council and City of Toronto.

CITY: TOO BIG, TOO SMALL

coordinating and financing regional services without a rethink of its governance arrangements.

So, as the 2014 municipal election campaigns take shape, a key question for mayoral and council candidates across the GTHA is: how do you propose to tackle this regional governance gap? More specifically, what governance and coordination mechanisms do you think are necessary to improve planning among GTHA municipalities, to enable better service coordination and to allow for joint decision-making?

There are plenty of options to look at. An elected upper-tier regional government could be created like the Greater London Authority, with a mayor and assembly and responsibility for coordinating metro functions such as transport, police and economic development across 33 lower-tier governments. In many city-regions around the world, voluntary cooperation arrangements have been formed by municipalities to enable coordination. Metrolinx’s governance structure could be enhanced to include provincial and local representation so there is some accountability for transportation planning decisions and other special-purpose agencies could be created to coordinate regional economic and growth planning.

Of course, another important question is how to engage the Province in regional governance reform? This is clearly an issue that’s time has come. Prospective local leaders should be eager to start this conversation and when better than during an election campaign.

The report, Too Big, Yet Still Too Small: The Mixed Legacy of the Montréal and Toronto Amalgamations, can be found on the Institute on Municipal Finance and Governance website.