

Coalition about right to decide on our own

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One sure way to get people fired up — on both sides of the discussion — is to talk about policing costs, which is exactly what Belleville council has gone and done. But the city's decision to join a coalition on policing costs is the right one, not because costs here are either too high or too low, but because too many of those costs remain outside of our hands locally.

City council approved spending \$1,000 to join the Mayors' Coalition for Affordable, Sustainable, Accountable Policing Monday night. The hope of the coalition is that a collective voice will be able to get the provincial government to improve the transparency and accountability of policing costs, in particular where it pertains to Ontario Provincial Police contracts.

While the coalition is geared predominantly toward municipalities with OPP contracts, the cost for municipal forces — such as Belleville — play a role in the debate. Coun. Taso Christopher told council he attended a session at the recent Ontario Small Urban Municipalities conference where policing costs were discussed.

Christopher said rising police costs are a concern to all municipalities, regardless of whether it is a provincial or municipal force holding the contract.

“It's driven by the larger centres,” he said. “Whatever the OPP get, the municipal law enforcement officers want the same thing ... so this is an opportunity for the mayor to be at that table and look at the escalating costs of policing.”

The current situation would be fine if OPP costs were based on the needs of some of its smaller centres, like Prince Edward County or Quinte West. But generally OPP costing, especially for salaries, is based on what Toronto police officers receive.

Dealing with salaries generally leads to arbitration, where arbitrators tend to look at what others get — notably the OPP — and rule other officers deserve the same. Thus we are left with the bizarre situation of Belleville police making salaries comparable to Toronto, despite the fact Belleville's cost of living is considerably less than Toronto's and the risk is arguably less, despite what Maclean's magazine might say. And considering Belleville's policing costs are nearly \$14 million annually out of a city budget of about \$110 million, the issue is significant.

At the end of the day, this isn't about whether our police officers get paid too much, too little or just the right amount. It's about who gets to determine that and how much say we should have. The decision to join this coalition is not about bashing our police officers; it's just trying to claim the right to make our own decisions on our own.