

Eastern Ontario communities struggle with police costs

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The rising cost of policing is hitting smaller eastern Ontario municipalities particularly hard, with mayors joining together to fight it.

Hawkesbury's contract with the Ontario Provincial Police is expected to top \$4 million this year, which would take up 43 per cent of its incoming property taxes. That's more than double what the town paid a decade ago. "If it continues at that rate, I'm simply not going to pay," said Hawkesbury Mayor Rene Berthiaume.

A CBC News analysis of per-capita spending on their own local police forces (excluding First Nations communities) shows six area communities are in the top 20. That includes Gananoque, which has the second-highest rate of per-capita spending after Sioux Narrows/Nestor Falls in northeast Ontario.

It also includes Prescott, Smiths Falls, Cornwall, Brockville and Perth, the latter having recently begun a new contract with the OPP.

Berthiaume is part of a coalition of more than 100 mayors who want the province to give them more control over their policing costs. That lack of control is of particular concern in communities that get their police service on contract from the Ontario Provincial Police. The OPP determines its own staffing needs with a deployment model and negotiates salaries with the province.

In its most recent contract, the Ontario government promised to make OPP officers the highest paid police in the province in 2014. That means they'll see a raise of about 8.5 per cent, which would give a first-class constable anywhere in the province a salary of approximately \$94,000. Officers can reach the rank of first-class constable with three years of experience.

In Hawkesbury, Berthiaume said his town is facing even higher costs than most because of its location. The town is on the border with Quebec, and he says the bridge across the Ottawa River is a route for drugs coming from the port of Montreal.

"Being a unique situation, I think the government needs to look at us separately and say, 'Let's fix the anomaly to the level where they should be,'" he said.

Some municipalities, such as Gananoque, receive a provincial grant for police services which helps mitigate the cost to property taxpayers. However, many others with high per-capita costs do not receive that grant. That includes Hawkesbury, even though the town is in the top 30 for per capita spending on police. Hawkesbury also pays more per capita for OPP service than any other municipality of its size (5,000 to 15,000 residents) with an OPP contract.

Ontario's Community Safety Minister Madeleine Meilleur said the department is looking at ways to share costs among municipalities, but she has no plans to give Hawkesbury a special deal.