



A new \$21-million, 43,000-square-foot central administration building in Haldimand County houses 176 of the municipality's staff and improves convenience for residents. *Credit: Tom Arban*

## New civic building looks to the future

Cathy Case, Haldimand County's general manager of corporate and social services, used to take 40 minutes out of her day, several days a week, to drive to and from meetings with municipal colleagues. And she was not the only one.

It was estimated that county employees were spending the equivalent of one full-time staff member, or about 1,820 hours a year, driving to meetings at administrative buildings dotted throughout the large municipality.

A new \$21-million, 43,000-square-foot central administration building has eliminated those frequent commutes. The three-floor building, which opened last February, houses 176 of the municipality's staff members and improves convenience for residents. In addition to co-locating staff members, the building is part of a broader effort to find efficiencies, improve organizational work culture through increased collaboration, and provide a customer service focus. Along with other steps, including organizational changes and employee training, the building is a key component toward business transformation.

Haldimand County, a single-tier municipality, is made up of urbanized

areas of Dunnville, Hagersville, Cayuga, Caledonia, Jarvis, and the rural lands in between, with about 45,000 people. In 2016, with a growing population, council voted to centralize the county's administration with a new main building in Cayuga.

Prior to the new building, residents could go to their local office to pay bills and access other services. But in many cases, such as for a development project, a resident would have needed to see the building inspector in one office, a planner in another, and obtain water and road permits in another office.

"People had to travel to three or four different offices, and Haldimand County is so huge geographically that it's not like driving down the street to another office. And we don't have a transit system, so the difficulties for the customer were really apparent. Now we provide a one-stop shop for residents who need to come to the building," said Case.

Case said the biggest benefit for staff is being able to connect in person with co-workers, with some even meeting for the first time.

"Prior to the new building, we were spread out amongst six offices," she said.

"I know that you can pick up the phone or email, but it's not the same as being able to just pop down to someone's office and discuss an item in much more detail and come to a quick resolution."

Case said she can see the benefits, even while county employees are alternating days in the office, due to COVID-19. Co-workers are forming lunchtime walking groups or playing ping pong in the wellness area during breaks.

"It develops working relationships and creates positive morale," she said.

### Building Project Pushes the Envelope

It can be a political risk to consider shutting down municipal buildings or building a new one.

"In rural small-town Ontario, people are very fiscally conscious," said Haldimand County CAO Craig Manley. Despite this, in 2015, as the county's population grew, council wanted to investigate how to continue effectively delivering services. Many residents

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The council chamber and POA courtroom balances elegance and simplicity. Desks are castored and natural materials as accents add warmth. *Credit: Tom Arban*

initially opposed the project due to concerns over expense or loss of local services.

County staff looked at the conditions of the existing buildings, including needed repairs, fire safety, and accessibility. They presented council with three options for addressing these issues: the existing dispersed model with some enhancements; a consolidation of development-related services while maintaining a customer service presence in each community; and a full consolidation model, closing the six local centres and moving all of the administrative staff into one, new building.

“We were able to show council that when you looked at lifecycle costs, any decision was going to be expensive,” said Manley. County staff found that a new building would cost \$21 million, while the cost to fix the old buildings would be about \$18 million. “We were able to demonstrate that, initially, consolidation was the more expensive option but in the long run we would get several decades of cost savings.”

Next, council chose to locate the new building in Cayuga, because it is the county seat and all residents can drive there in about 15-20 minutes. Council saved about \$2 million by choosing to build on property the county owned, which had an arena, parking lot, stormwater retention pond, and servicing.

As for the surplus buildings, one was leased, some were sold, and one will be demolished. One is now a satellite office for the Ontario Provincial Police, and

another is used for public health and social services.

“It’s really difficult to build a good building in a smaller town,” said Bill Curran, principal architect at TCA/Thier + Curran Architects. “They tend to be very conservative, and they tend to be more concerned about the community’s perception. So to get a small town client to push the envelope like this is pretty rare. And they were fabulous that way, right from the outset.”

“The one concern is always about it being too ostentatious or the perception of it being too expensive. That was an important issue for them, because these projects are under a microscope in a small town and they had their share of critics, of course. It is a difficult balance to strike.”

The building features sleek, patterned wood cladding on the upper floors and stone on the council chamber, which combine to add elegance. A two-storey lobby adds civic grandeur and provides a spot for community events. Extending from the lobby is the main public stairwell, with an illuminated roof lantern reaching skyward. The architects borrowed space from the parking lot, changed the paving and put in landscaping to create a modest civic plaza that adds some distinction.

Sustainable design features include stormwater retention in planters, perforated piping for natural recharge, an energy efficient heat pump-type HVAC system, waterless urinals, and localized





The two-storey lobby has easy views to all public counters and provides a spot for community events. *Credit: Tom Arban*



The staff room features varied seating, warm colours, and unique light fixtures to create a non-institutional space. *Credit: Tom Arban*

instant hot water heaters to avoid water storage. Generous windows provide plenty of light and the lighting system automatically steps down to adjust to the level of outdoor light.

The central administration building was built with extra space to accommodate about 20 per cent growth in county workforce. In the meantime, the basement is used for wellness opportunities and space on the third floor is used for informal meetings and collaboration, but it also has the infrastructure in place for staff workspace. An exuberant palette of bold, warm colours were used throughout to avoid the stigma many government buildings portray of banality.

“It was about creating a high-quality public building that didn’t go too far in terms of extravagance and at the same

time, providing a really high-quality workplace for employees,” said Curran.

### Workplace Exemplar

Manley said that the project leaders engaged with staff to find out what they wanted in a workplace and were able to incorporate those elements, including generous natural daylight and views, operable windows, and many meeting spaces. The county also provided each staff member with laptop-tablets so they could work wherever they wanted to within the completely wireless building.

Workstations, while smaller, all have ergonomic desks that adjust by push-button from sitting to standing, coat lockers, and a low cabinet that pulls out to become a guest chair. Managers’ offices are also modest and have less

formal corner desks with small benches and tables for meetings, a new benchmark for collegiality.

Gone are the standard gang washrooms. Instead, all staff washrooms are unisex, accessible private rooms, offering privacy and looking decidedly non-governmental. There are no vast seas of workstations but rather small pods are created using islands of meeting rooms, offices, and service rooms to break down the floor area, and a white noise system muffles noise transmission. No one is further than 45 feet from the windows.

The county also wanted to “democratize the workspace” by having all senior management located with their staff, rather than in corner offices or on a separate floor.

“This way, people get to know, trust, and respect their leaders, and the leaders get a better pulse on what is happening,” Manley said.

The mayor and CAO offices are on the first floor, where residents at the service counter can see them, to reinforce that they are accessible and there to serve the public.

While the new building provides a one-stop shop for residents, the county wanted to maintain a presence in each local area. Through self-service kiosks at all library branches (also designed by the architects), residents can log into the county portal for services such as paying taxes or registering for programs. While they can also do this at home, the kiosks are important for rural residents with poor internet access or those who may need assistance from a librarian.

“Our role was to wrap architecture around the county’s mission,” said Curran. “Now, Haldimand County is well placed with a quality civic landmark that will also appeal to future prospective, young employees and help retain current staff.”

“The project was not just about a building but something that reflected the values of our community,” said Manley. “So one of the key things was to ensure that it was good quality and hitting all of our objectives but that it was seen as being a prudent investment by the average person and not seen as a Taj Mahal.

“It’s about changing our work culture. It’s about making smart decisions, being efficient, and presenting a positive image to our community. It’s about respecting our path and making a good decision that will take us well into the future.” **MW**



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