

ROMA 2026 Post-Conference Workshop Report

Polarity Thinking in Local Government: Core Municipal Responsibilities and Growing Community Aspirations

Prepared for: Association of Municipalities of Ontario (AMO)

Conference: ROMA 2026 – Toronto, ON

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Session Type: Participatory Workshop

1. Purpose of the Session

This workshop was designed to introduce elected officials to **Polarity Thinking**, a leadership framework developed by Dr. Barry Johnson, and to apply it to a persistent governance tension facing Ontario municipalities.

From an asset management perspective, the polarity between Core Municipal Responsibilities and Growing Community Aspirations reflects a deeper leadership challenge: aligning long-term asset stewardship with evolving service-level expectations. Participants consistently recognized that infrastructure is not an end in itself, but the platform that enables housing, economic development, community well-being, and growth.

Core Municipal Responsibilities ↔ Growing Community Aspirations

Rather than framing this tension as a problem to be solved, the session invited participants to explore it as an **ongoing polarity** — two interdependent values that must be managed well over time rather than “chosen” between.

The goal of the session was to:

- Move participants beyond either/or thinking
- Provide a practical governance tool they can apply immediately
- Surface shared insights from lived municipal experience
- Normalize complexity, uncertainty, and competing truths in local decision-making

2. Participation and Engagement

Attendance was strong, with **close to 200 elected officials** participating. While a small number of attendees chose to leave when it became clear the session was highly interactive, approximately **95% remained engaged throughout the full workshop**, with many arriving early and staying beyond the scheduled end time.

The session format emphasized:

- Small-group discussion
- Collective sense-making
- Real-time mapping of benefits, risks, and trade-offs

Participant willingness to engage deeply, challenge assumptions, and learn collaboratively was a notable strength of the session.

3. Overview of Polarity Thinking Framework

As introduced in the workshop handout, polarity thinking rests on several core principles:

- Many governance tensions are **unavoidable**
- Both “sides” of a tension contain wisdom
- Over-focusing on either pole produces predictable downsides
- Sustainable leadership requires **leveraging both poles intentionally**

Participants were guided through a **Polarity Map**, identifying:

- Upsides of each pole
- Downsides of over-focusing on one pole
- The risks of neglecting the other

This approach aligns with Barry Johnson’s assertion that “the work of leadership is not to eliminate tension, but to create the conditions where opposing truths can serve one another.”

4. Key Insights from the Live Polarity Mapping Exercise

A. Upsides of Focusing on Core Municipal Responsibilities

Participants identified significant benefits when municipalities prioritize essential services such as infrastructure, transportation networks, emergency services, water and waste management, and recreation. Common themes included:

- Financial sustainability and predictable budgets
- Public trust and reliability of services
- Risk mitigation and regulatory compliance
- Ability to maintain existing assets and meet legislative obligations
- Stable foundations that could enable future innovation

There was strong recognition that **well-maintained core services form the baseline for livability, economic activity, and public confidence.**

B. Downsides of Over-Focusing on Core Responsibilities Alone

Participants were equally clear about the risks of an exclusive focus on “the basics,” including:

- Community stagnation and lack of vitality
- Difficulty attracting and retaining residents, particularly youth and potentially staff
- Public perception that municipal work is invisible or uninspiring
- Declining social capital and community engagement
- Risk of population decline and reduced long-term revenue

Many groups noted that **excellent infrastructure alone does not create belonging, excitement, or community identity**, and that neglecting aspirational elements can erode public support over time.

C. Upsides of Focusing on Community Aspirations and Growth

Participants identified compelling benefits when municipalities invest in community amenities, housing, arts, culture, and future-oriented initiatives:

- Attraction and retention of residents and businesses
- Expanded tax base and economic diversification
- Increased social cohesion, health, and well-being
- Stronger community identity and civic pride
- Improved staff attraction, innovation, and adaptability

This pole was associated with **hope, momentum, and future readiness**, particularly in communities facing demographic change or growth pressures.

D. Downsides of Over-Focusing on Aspirations and Growth

Participants were candid about the risks of leaning too far toward aspirations without sufficient grounding:

- Infrastructure strain and growing maintenance deficits
- Higher taxes, fees, and public resistance
- Growth that does not pay for itself
- Staff burnout and organizational overextension
- Loss of trust when expectations outpace capacity

Several groups emphasized that **amenities without foundational infrastructure create fragile communities**, and that growth pursued without long-term planning can undermine the very outcomes it seeks to achieve.

5. Cross-Cutting Learnings

Across tables, several consistent insights emerged:

- A. This tension is universal** — it shows up in small, rural, growing, and declining communities alike.
- B. Conflict often arises not from bad intent, but from unacknowledged polarities.**

- C. Councils and staff frequently talk past one another when these tensions are framed as problems instead of dynamics.
- D. Naming the polarity openly creates space for more respectful, strategic conversations.
- E. Polarity thinking offers a **shared language** that can reduce polarization and build trust.

Taken together, these insights suggest that many governance challenges facing municipalities today are less about choosing priorities and more about strengthening councils' ability to manage enduring trade-offs over time. Participants expressed appreciation for having a framework that validates complexity rather than oversimplifying it.

6. Housing and growth opportunities as a Living Polarity

Housing emerged repeatedly in table discussions as a practical example of polarity tension in action. Participants noted that enabling housing requires both:

- Well-maintained core infrastructure (water, wastewater, roads, emergency services), and
- Strategic investments in growth-related infrastructure, amenities, and planning capacity.

Participants identified risks on both ends: housing ambitions that outpace infrastructure capacity, and infrastructure investment strategies that fail to anticipate or enable future housing needs. The polarity framework helped participants see housing not as a standalone issue, but as a systems challenge requiring coordinated, long-term governance.

7. Implications for Municipal Leadership

The session reinforced that effective municipal leadership today requires:

- Comfort with ambiguity and trade-offs
- Long-term thinking alongside responsiveness
- Governance conversations that move beyond “either/or” positions
- Tools that help councils stay focused, curious, and non-reactive

Polarity thinking was widely viewed as a **practical governance tool**, not a theoretical concept — one that can be used in council chambers, budget discussions, strategic planning, and community engagement. It is particularly useful for councils navigating complex decisions related to asset management, housing enablement, fiscal sustainability, and community expectations.

8. Conclusion

This workshop demonstrated strong appetite among elected officials for **critical thinking tools that reflect the real complexity of local governance**. Participants engaged deeply, contributed generously from their lived experience, and left with a clearer understanding that many of the tensions they face are not failures of leadership but enduring realities of public service.

By shifting the conversation from “Which side is right?” to “How do we steward both well?”, polarity thinking offers municipalities a pathway toward more resilient, mature, and effective governance. This framing allows asset management to be viewed not as a constraint on ambition, but as the enabling platform that allows communities to grow, adapt, and meet evolving service and housing needs sustainably.