

Council voices support for electing Regional chair

By Brock Weir

It is an issue that has been simmering on the backburner for years, but local politicians are set to turn up the heat this week on electing the Chair of York Region Council.

Regional Councillors are set to consider a motion from Markham Regional Councillor Joe Li calling for significant changes in how the leader is chosen. Currently, the Regional Chair is elected by members directly elected to Regional Council. Their chosen one could be anybody ? elected or otherwise ? with little to no input from the public. It is a system that should change, according to proponents of Councillor Li's motion, but others aren't quite as convinced.

Aurora Councillors convened Tuesday afternoon for a Special Council meeting to discuss Councillor Li's motion, which supports Newmarket-Aurora MPP Chris Ballard's Private Members Bill to scrap the current system in favour of a Region-wide General Vote. It was put on the table by Councillor Michael Thompson who called on his colleagues to show their support for change ahead of the Regional meeting.

?It is important for anybody to be accountable to the public,? said Councillor Thompson. ?When you look at what Chris Ballard has brought forward and what Regional Councillor Li has brought forward, I think it is an opportunity for us to revamp the system and we should take advantage of that. It might mean better representation for Aurora, so there is an opportunity for both elected representation that is more accountable to the public, as well as how Aurora can have a better say at the Regional level.?

At present, Aurora's lone voice around the Regional Council table is Mayor Geoff Dawe. While municipalities with just one Regional vote have continually fought for greater representation around the table, Mayor Dawe said he was unconvinced electing a Regional Chair was the right way forward.

?If you had asked me five years ago before I was elected, I would have said, absolutely, it was the right thing to do, [but] having been involved with it, you think maybe there are some better ways to handle this.?

While Mayor Dawe said he believes the idea of an elected chair ?has merit?, an election at large where one person has to run a campaign throughout the entire Region of York might be cumbersome and cost-prohibitive.

?What hasn't been given any airplay at all up to this point is the cost to run an election,? said Mayor Dawe. ?Where will all that money come from? One of the comments made to me was, 'I don't like the system the way it is now because the perception is there are too many backroom deals to make this happen.' Are we naïve to think there wouldn't be any pressure? Where is that money going to come from? Is there not going to be any pressure that comes from raising those kinds of funds? Pressure to raise those funds in the first place? What becomes associated with that??

This is a view shared to some degree by Councillor John Abel. While he said ahead of this week's Special Council meeting he would support the motion before them because it is a system that has been adopted in some other Ontario jurisdictions and lends the process some transparency, he said whoever throws their hat in the Regional ring will need to have a lot of resources behind them.

?The success of a campaign may be the person that has the most funding behind them and might not necessarily reflect the person best suited and I think that is a bit of an advantage when the Regional Council votes,? said Councillor Abel.

Also supporting an elected chair is Councillor Tom Mrakas, who characterised the position as the most powerful within York Region and yet is ?really not held accountable to any of the taxpaying residents in York Region.?

He rejected the concerns over the costs of running a campaign.

?You could use that logic for any election, whether Councillor, Mayor or anyone,? he said. ?If that's the case, let's eliminate all financial backing for everyone. I find it difficult to use that argument for one position but not the other. It is not a straight-across concern when it comes to elections as a whole, so why should it be for this one position??