

Province moves to scrap Regional Chair vote

By Brock Weir

The race to lead York Region came to an abrupt halt on Friday with Ontario Premier Doug Ford announcing the Provincial government would scrap the election of the Regional Chair in York, Peel, Muskoka and Niagara, with just hours left in the nomination period.

In a statement released Friday, Mr. Ford said it was a move to "deliver better government."

"We ran on a commitment to restore accountability and trust, to reduce the size and cost of government, including an end to the culture of waste and mismanagement," said Mr. Ford. "Because one thing every politician at every level and in every region needs to remember is we all share the same boss. We all work for the people."

In addition to scrapping the Regional Chair vote, a process which got underway following a motion by then Newmarket-Aurora MPP (and now Aurora mayoral candidate) Chris Ballard which was subsequently passed by the Ontario Legislature, the Better Local Government Act also outlined plans to slash the size of Toronto Council by nearly half to align with the current 25 provincial and federal ridings in the City of Toronto.

Ahead of Friday's announcement, a number of high profile candidates were in the Regional Chair races, including former Ontario cabinet minister Steven Del Duca in York and, in Peel, former Progressive Conservative leader John Miller and Mr. Ford's predecessor Patrick Brown.

The reaction to the move here in Aurora was swift, particularly as electing the York Regional Chair had been a contentious issue around the Council table.

Aurora Council almost unanimously voted in favour of sending a clear message to the Region they would like to see the Head of Council become an elected position, something Mayor Geoff Dawe ultimately voted against as the Town's representative at the upper tier.

The first reaction came from Mr. Ballard, who said residents have a "fundamental right" to choose who governs us. He said he was "profoundly disappointed" the new Ontario government was going back on reforms.

"As Member of Provincial Parliament for Newmarket-Aurora, I introduced Private Members' Bill 43 to directly elect the Chair," said Mr. Ballard. "It received unanimous support by all parties before being sent to an all-party committee for consideration. At committee, residents of all political stripes came forward to testify in support of my Bill. This is not a partisan issue."

"Previous versions of [my Bill] had been introduced by York Region MPPs Reza Moridi and Helena Jaczek. They, too, had received all-party support, including from my predecessor, Frank Klees, a Progressive Conservative. Julia Munro, Progressive Conservative MPP for Simcoe North spoke in support of my Bill in the Legislature, as did MPP Gila Martow, Progressive Conservative, representing Thornhill."

"Directly electing the Regional Chair is important so that you and I can have a say in what goes on at Regional Council. Direct election means we are able to hold the most powerful politician in the Region accountable. With a 2018 Operating Budget of \$2.28 billion, a 2018 capital budget of \$810 million, and significant debt, the Region is responsible for a large portion of the municipal tax bill we pay. But, perhaps more important, the Regional Chair has a huge say in how our Region, its towns, cities and villages will look in future years. Is growth balanced? Is the environment protected? Is there adequate public transit? Are Regional roads being well maintained? All this, and more, lie at the feet of the Regional Chair."

Addressing Friday's announcement, Mr. Dawe did not comment on the Premier's decision directly, but reiterated his position on why he believes the Chair of York Region should be appointed by members of Regional Council rather than by the public at large.

"It is no secret that I was not in favour of moving to an Elected Regional Chair," he said. "The existing system, where the democratically elected representatives of York Regional Council vote for the Chair, has served Aurora well and ensured that our relatively small community continues to have a strong voice in Regional affairs."

"The Northern 6 [York Region] Communities, which include Aurora, represent roughly one quarter of York Region's population. An elected Regional Chair, in all likelihood, would be selected from the more populous communities in the south. While I am sure that whoever was elected would do his or her best to represent all York Region communities, I can't help but think there would be bias towards the south. As Mayor of Aurora, I have 1 vote in 20. It represents far better odds than 1 in 300,000!"

Mr. Mrakas, on the other hand, has a far different view.

"The issue was not contentious at Aurora Council," he said. "Council voted 8 ? 1 in support of an elected chair. The only member who did not support democratically elected representation at the Regional level was Geoff Dawe. Further, he voted against Council

direction at Regional Council, voting against an elected Chair and for the status quo of appointing someone to the job.?
?The municipalities in York Region are on record supporting electing the Regional Chair,? added Mr. Abel. ?It's part of democratic process. I would have preferred a longer timeline and consultation with the Province prior to any decision.?
At press time, the confirmed candidates for York Region's chair were, in alphabetical order, Steven Del Duca, Mario Racco, Rasari Sriskandarajah, Chevaunne Stewart and Judith Tenenbaum.

HAVE YOUR SAY ? Should the Provincial Government allow the election of the York Regional Chair to continue? Have your say at letters@auroran.com.