

## Strong mayor powers raise questions around Council table

Local lawmakers are hoping to have more information on what impact 'Strong Mayor' powers might have on the community before signing off on a housing pledge at the end of the month.

Council last week took their first formal look at a draft housing pledge that will commit the Town of Aurora to facilitating the build of 8,000 new housing units by 2031.

Upon approval and submission to the Province, the Ontario Government will bestow new powers on the mayors of several communities, including Aurora, that will give heads of Council the authority to veto bylaws that are seen as contrary to the Province's housing goals, as well as the power to hire and fire key municipal officials.

While Council largely agreed with the principles of the housing pledge, the resulting 'Strong Mayor' powers that come with it gave some lawmakers pause, requesting a report with further information on its impacts come before Council before ratification at the end of the month.

Ward Councillors expressing concerns over the 'Strong Mayor' powers said handing over additional powers to the Head of Council would be to go against commitments made to their constituents, while those who were more supportive of the plan said it was a decision made by the Province that is unlikely to change, and suggested that opposition might be politically motivated.

'When you go to what the Strong Mayors' powers are, they'll result in the ability to choose and appoint a Chief Administrative Officer (CAO), hire certain department heads, establishing and reorganizing departments, proposing a municipal budget, which would be subject to Council amendments and a separate head of Council veto and override process, vetoing certain bylaws that interfere with provincial priority are also included,' said Ward 1 Councillor Ron Weese. '[Voters] trusted me to represent them on Council and for me to vote to abandon those interests would be undemocratic, in my mind, and may have long-term consequences.

'For that reason, I really hope something can be done to separate these two issues so that we can get these houses built and that we will not interfere with the democracy that already appears here with our electoral processes right now. The Mayor's campaign last election included him not supporting the Strong Mayor's powers and I trust he will continue in this direction, but I think we should all seek a compromise that gets homes built for our vibrant and growing community while protecting this democratic process.'

Ward 5 Councillor John Gallo had similar issues, putting forward an amendment that the Town's commitment to the housing pledge come with Strong Mayor powers limited only to areas relevant to the Province's housing target and construction-related matters.

Pressed by Ward 4 Councillor Michael Thompson to 'give a little bit more detail' on why he was in favour of ceding some powers to the Head of Council and not others, Councillor Gallo said it was a matter of compromise.

'I realize that there may be times where under the guise of provincial housing targets that the Mayor might need to move things forward and I am okay with giving those. The alternative, and that is the compromise I am having, where the other items in that long laundry list, to me, don't relate to provincial housing targets: being able to hire or fire a CAO doesn't relate to provincial housing targets, being able to veto doesn't do that'. Some [powers] do, and I am okay if he has that [but] to me there is no rationale to give the authority to one person on Council.'

Councillor Thompson, on the other hand, was supportive of both the housing pledge and 'Strong Mayor' powers moving forward because 'at the end of the day the Conservative government who is in power' put forward legislation they felt was both fair and equitable' in achieving their goals 'and went through a proper democratic process.'

'Now we're asked to play within the rules that have now been set,' he said. 'We all talk about accountability and accountability for our decisions, and those of us who have been on Council for many years we've had to explain why we voted for something, why we

voted against something, and ultimately we stand by our records and are accountable for those decisions. It is no different, I assume, than if the Mayor were to exercise these Strong Mayor powers in whatever that situation that were to occur, he would also be called upon to explain his decision and it would fall upon him to respond to the residents and explain why he felt the need to do so.

?If you're opposed to the legislation as a whole, by all means. If you feel that it is wrong not just for Aurora but for everybody, then put forward a motion to strike the legislation down itself. To just say, '?just do it for us' feels a little more political than anything else.?

Ward 6 Councillor Harold Kim agreed, stating he would prefer the debate to be around the housing pledge.

?Over the years, many of us, if not all of us, have always said, time and time again, that we are creatures of the Province,? he said. ?We are creatures of the Province and the Province [has] made that legislation and we have to abide by it.?

Ward 2 Councillor Rachel Gilliland, on the other hand, was less than convinced, abstaining to vote for or against Councillor Gallo's motion.

?I understand in the spirit of democracy, especially a small Council like this, that Strong Mayor powers could affect some of the outcomes of why we were elected as individuals to represent the community on things such as boards, committees, hiring or firing staff and I totally support this housing pledge and the intent of moving things along and allowing the mayor to have those powers to put forward supporting evidence to address the housing targets and support of the pledge,? she said, before addressing Mayor Mrakas. ?For me, I believe you campaigned on not wanting the Strong Mayor powers and believing that it wasn't something that you required. I believe you also released a statement as such and I think what this Council is really looking for as well is that you would reinforce the powers that you intend on using in light of democracy, were intended for the purposes of this housing pledge

?We believe there are a lot more powers that are being offered within this that don't really [apply to] that. Some constituents have [concerns] because we are a rather small Council. It is kind of like a minority coalition and it doesn't necessarily strike a good pose with some people.?

Mayor Mrakas reiterated his previous position on Strong Mayor powers, stating he shared his views on the matter not only during the 2022 municipal election campaign, but also in a statement last month in response to Premier Ford's decision to grant the measures to nearly 30 further municipalities.

?All of us are going through this, so these are tools that are being provided to us, but at the end of the day, as I have said in my statement, we're going to continue working together to try and get things done for our community, for the betterment of our community. If we all follow that logic and do what is best for our community, in the best interests of our community, then we move forward in a positive manner,? he said.

He added he was happy to wait until this month's Council meeting to get a '?proper legal opinion?' on whether or not the powers are a done deal, but said the housing pledge also entailed financial incentives for the municipality in meeting the prescribed targets.

?I have no problem waiting until Council gets a more firmed up legal opinion, if that is what everyone feels more comfortable with it. As far as whether you use the powers or not, those are all hypothetical questions and what ifs, and I am not going to [deal in] hypothetical questions.?

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