

Aurora's Regional representation reviewed by York

Mayor Tom Mrakas' motion to reduce the size of Regional Council from its current slate of 21 members, to just a Regional Chair and York Region's nine mayors fizzled last week, but further representation for Aurora is set for further discussion later this month.

If passed, Mayor Mrakas' motion would have produced a report on the viability of shrinking the size of Regional Council in favour of a new system where each Mayor would have a single vote weighted according to the population of their respective municipalities.

Members sitting at the Committee of the Whole last week voted against sending the motion to staff on a vote of 13 to 5, effectively pouring cold water on the idea before Regional Council another look at further composition options on February 27.

Among the many other scenarios approved by Committee for further consideration at the end of the month, however, included adding another Regional Councillor to represent those communities with only one member at the Region.

York Region municipalities currently represented by one Regional member include their respective mayors include Aurora, King, Whitchurch-Stouffville and East Gwillimbury.

Mayor Mrakas' initial motion, he said, was a bid to achieve better representation at the Region with just one member per municipality.

In order to complete a thorough governance review and ensure a timely, effective and informed decision, all members of this Council should want complete information on all options, said Mayor Mrakas, making his pitch to the Region.

Speaking in favour of the matter, Mayor Mrakas outlined a history of governance at the Region, noting it has been a continual imperfect process to ensure effective representation by population.

Since its inception [over 40 years ago], the size of Regional Council has grown by almost 25 per cent and the associated costs have grown as well, he continued. York Region will continue to grow and representation by population will continue to be an issue. If we maintain our current practice of adding Regional Councillors to address the issue of voting equality for population disparity, our Regional Council will continue to balloon in size and in cost. Clearly, we should explore more cost-effective options than our current approach of adding members to solve representation issues.

The solution, he said, is to reduce the size of Council to just heads of Municipal Council ? the Mayors ? and implement weighted double majority voting.

?The status quo is not equitable and with our current structure, some municipalities are underrepresented and others are overrepresented,? he said. ?We have a responsibility to continually seek and do things better and this governance review is part of fulfilling that responsibility. Reducing Council and implementing weighted double-majority voting is the most cost-effective way to achieve equitable, effective decision-making at Regional Council. At the very least, it is our duty to consider it.?

Fellow members of Regional Council felt differently.

First to speak against the matter was Markham Regional Councillor Jim Jones who said there were other solutions that would achieve better results for York.

?If you're really looking at substantial savings, it is chicken feed the savings you're going to get by doing something on elected politicians,? he said, suggesting amalgamation throughout York Region.

Richmond Hill Councillor Carmine Perrelli said he couldn't support the motion and suggested a move away from having mayors at the Regional table.

?I think if we're going to go away from proportional representation, which seems to be what this [motion] is doing and we're going to go to a model of weighted votes, I would suggest at some point, if it is the will of this Committee, that we let the mayors run the cities and we let the Regional Councillors run the Region.?

This was similar to the view offered by Markham Regional Councillor Don Hamilton, who said leaving the mayors as municipalities' sole representatives at the Region would create a logistical issue.

?I don't see how the mayors would possibly have the time,? he said.

Also speaking against the motion was Newmarket Mayor John Taylor who said he did not share Mayor Mrakas' view that the size of Regional Council was ?ballooning?, noting that only four members of Regional Council have been added since the Region itself was created in the early 1970s.

?I don't think it is fair to frame us as having a continually ballooning size of Regional Council,? said Mayor Taylor. ?If that is the problem we're solving, it is not a problem.

?I think having mayors-only and introducing weighted voting is a significant change. It is a bold proposal. I think that it, frankly,

might be in some people's best interests or some communities', but it certainly wouldn't be in the best interests of Newmarket or the Northern Six [municipalities of York Region]

. The Northern Six would go from having about 45 per cent representation now to 25 per cent representation by vote.

?We're not solving a ballooning Regional Council. Are we solving a cost problem? We're going to save, what, \$500,000 to \$1 million in a \$3 billion budget. Not to say that \$500,000 to \$1 million doesn't matter, but if you think places like Vaughan and Markham with no Regional Councillors who spend full time hours responding to Regional issues and residents aren't going to need to staff up in the Mayor's Office to manage all those calls that nobody else is sitting there answering anymore? We know from Toronto that is not the case.?

Talks will continue February 27 at the Regional headquarters in Newmarket. The meeting is scheduled to begin at 9 a.m.

By Brock Weir