

Council members take Regional Chair push to Queen's Park

By Brock Weir

Aurora lawmakers were in Toronto last week calling for an elected Chair for the Region of York.

Following Regional Council's decision to vote down a motion from Markham Councillor Joe Li to make the head of the Region an elected position following a Private Members' Bill in the Ontario Legislature from Newmarket-Aurora MPP Chris Ballard, Councillor Wendy Gaertner was the first representative from Aurora to appear before the standing committee on Mr. Ballard's resulting piece of legislation, Bill 42.

There is 'a lot of interest' in the community, she said on the election versus appointment of the Regional Chair, as occupied now by former Whitchurch-Stouffville mayor Wayne Emmerson, adding she said she believed she could 'accurately say' there is an overwhelming support for an election.

'This is a position of power, influence and responsibility,' she said. 'It has been said many times the person holding this position should be elected by those people they are going to serve. That is in keeping with our democratic principles.'

For many of the committee members responding to Councillor Gaertner's comments, it translated to them as a call for further engagement and she was asked if she had heard any arguments in favour of the status quo.

'I haven't heard anything compelling,' she replied. 'We put forward a motion [at] Aurora Council supporting the election of the chair. The vote was eight to one, with the Mayor speaking against it. I think that our municipality is very interested in not having the status quo. I have heard a couple of issues [with an election]: One, that it is expensive, but we're talking about democracy. If we're going to spend our money somewhere, let's spend it to enhance democracy.'

Councillor Gaertner also cited concerns of a possible 'power struggle' between southern York Region municipalities and the northern tier in being adequately represented, but that paled in comparison to 'democracy', she added.

'Change is hard and there are always issues and often [unforeseen] issues, but I think in this case, we have been talking around and about this for so long with many good minds,' she said, responding to Mr. Ballard. 'I think we can anticipate pretty much anything that is going to happen.'

Mayor Dawe was originally slated to appear before the committee on Wednesday afternoon, but pulled out due to a scheduling conflict with the official launch of the 2016 Run/Walk for Southlake. Making his submission in writing, he questioned Councillor Gaertner's view on the community buy-in for an elected chair.

'Based on what I have heard, I cannot make that same statement,' he wrote. 'I have heard from exactly three people on this. The first was MPP Ballard's constituency assistant, the second is Councillor Michael Thompson, who brought forward a motion to support Bill 42 at our Council and the third is a local resident who is very engaged in local politics. That's it. There is no general interest, let alone overwhelming support for this issue.'

In his statement, he outlined several reasons he does not support electing the Regional Chair, including a view previously offered at Regional Council criticizing the Bill for specifically targeting the Region of York, and the greater need for a governance review of the Region as a whole where Aurora is one of several municipalities 'under-represented' by just one member at the table.

'Our [Regional] Council, vote overwhelmingly in favour of a governance review which, among other items, included 'manner of electing the Regional Chair,' Mayor Dawe wrote. 'Our Council, and me, are not against [an] elected chair, but we are not in favour of a 'solution' that may address a perceived lack of democracy but does not address the real issue of overall governance.'

Flying the flag for Aurora at last week's session in Toronto were Councillor Michael Thompson, himself a member of the Run/Walk for Southlake Committee, and resident Catherine Marshall. In his delegation, he said people do not "get a chance to speak" to the selection of the Regional Chair.

"If we, as Councillors, are accountable to the residents through Municipal Election, I believe that the Regional Chair should be accountable in the same fashion to all those who live within the Region," he said. "In Aurora, 43 per cent of residents' tax dollars go to the Region. That's a larger portion to the Town and yet what say do the residents have on how their money will be spent or was spent? Being more accountable means giving residents a voice and/or vote on who will lead the Region.

"In an elected system, candidates for regional chair would need to share their vision for both the region and Aurora, and explain how they would plan to address the issues that matter most to the residents. During the last election, we had no idea what, if any, thoughts the chair had on regional growth, transportation, affordable housing or even who was going to run for regional chair.

"In my opinion, the election of a regional chair would provide an opportunity to raise awareness of regional issues and allow the community to weigh in on the discussion and play an active role in the shaping of our future. To me, more public engagement is not just a principle of good governance but leads to a more effective and efficient government."

Putting off a decision on electing the Regional Chair pending a governance review, he added, is something that can be done in-house at the Regional level and is a secondary issue.

"Sometimes at the Council table we say, "Let's stick to the motion at hand and try not to stray too far,"" said Councillor Thompson. "To me, that argument is a separate argument."