

Delegates tell Council that Strong Mayor powers will hurt democracy

Strong Mayor powers are expected to be granted this fall to more than two dozen communities across Ontario, including Aurora. But at last week's Council meeting, residents were clear in their view that this Provincial decision will be a hit on local democracy.

On September 26, five Aurora residents stepped up to the podium to make their opposition clear ? and they were united in their view that the granting of this power will have long-lasting implications across Town.

?Under the guise of the More Homes Built Faster Act, the Mayor would also be given Strong Mayoral powers, but for what purpose?? asked Peter Smith. ?From a layman's perspective, the pledge seems like a page from the Greenbelt fiasco. We wonder if the next headline will read, ?Sorry, folks, for the mess.' Without getting into specifics, there are a number of issues that require answers. What are the terms of the agreement and the length of the contract? Will additional special powers be granted to cover future issues? Why are there no provisions for affordable housing?

?I realize we're in a housing crisis and that issue is considered as a top priority for governments. But I disagree with Strong Mayoral powers as a means of fast-tracking housing developments in a process where one-third represents a majority. This whole exercise is a violation of democracy. Granting special powers (no matter what the reason) goes against our basic rights and must be stopped.?

Strong Mayor powers ?concentrates power to minority rule,? he said, and minimizes the role and impact of Councillors, committees and members of the public.

?It is a violation of our beliefs of modern-day democracy and raises fundamental questions about the motives of the present Provincial government and those who support it. If Strong Mayoral powers are granted and accepted, you have to question why we would need the [six] elected Councillors. This in itself should be deeply troubling to everyone in this Town. If approved, residents' voices, as expressed through their duly-elected representatives would become null and void.?

This was a view shared by the four other residents who came to speak out against the issue.

Steve Fleck, who ran for the Ward 5 Councillor position in last year's municipal election, dubbed the granting of Strong Mayor powers as a ?travesty.?

?The granting of a full extent of the so-called Strong Mayor powers is a travesty of democracy,? he said. ?It would eliminate one of the most fundamental principles of our system of democracy: parliamentary and government procedures that in all situations a majority shall rule. That majority should be respected. If we don't have that, what do we have? We'll be way out on a very slippery slope where a minority of people would have the ultimate say over the majority. That is undemocratic and completely unacceptable to me.?

Resident Andy Mitchell called it an ?affront? to democracy and an ?erosion? of our representative system.

?Strong Mayor powers by definition are not democratic and go against the very core of the democratic process,? he said. ?They are not right on any level. The housing commitment is only the first case. Who knows what else there will be. This erosion of democracy scares me. It is a slippery slope when we ignore democratic process for the sake of political expediency.?

This view of ?eroded? democracy was echoed by Bruce Orrell, who cited the reduction of Council's numbers from eight to six in 2018 and the adoption of the Ward system in 2022 as further hits.

?What you need to remember is we go to the polls every four years as our part of a social contract,? Orrell told Councillors. ?We elect you to do work on our behalf, represent us if needed, and to manage the Town's business. This does not mean that once you get elected you can change the rules. Less than a year ago we elected this Council. Why bother having an election for six Ward

Councillors if four of them will not have a voice going forward? I urge the six Ward Councillors at this table today to think long and hard about Strong Mayor powers.

?How does it help Aurora? More importantly, how does it help foster a democratic process that we have fought wars to protect? How do you feel less than a quarter through your current mandate, essentially giving the power to one person as long as he can have two of you to agree with him? Finally, three years from now, when you're knocking on doors seeking re-election, how are you going to stand on a record of performance when you are for all intents and purposes a rubber stamp for the Mayor?

?Most of you around this table have been party to the Council changes over the last three Councils. This is your opportunity to stop this madness. Do not allow strong mayor powers. We did not vote for this.?

Added David Heard: ?To utilize Strong Mayor powers is nothing like Aurora has ever been, should be, or I hope will ever be. A democratic Aurora should remain. If history is altered, I ask that all citizens remember this day at the polls. We have seen and heard chatter of 4 ? 3 votes and 3 ? 4 votes, one side, one stance, the other side another stance?. I would love to see the day of hard-working team research, evidence-based great concepts and ideas and plans tabled so good that everyone agrees.

?Do the right thing. History awaits your decision.?

By Brock WeirEditorLocal Journalism Initiative Reporter