

Elected regional chair is all about democracy, says MPP

By Brock Weir

One word: democracy.

That is the word from Newmarket-Aurora MPP Chris Ballard when asked why people should care whether or not the Chair of York Region Council should be elected by residents in all of York's nine municipalities.

The Province of Ontario announced that, should the newly introduced Building Ontario Up for Everyone Act work its way through the Legislature this year, the Chair of York Region Council, and their counterparts across most of the Province, will be up to voters in time for the 2018 Municipal Election.

The move has its roots in a private members' bill introduced by Mr. Ballard before he was appointed Ontario's Minister of Housing earlier this year. Entitled the Direct Election of the York Region Chair, the bill received all party support during its first and second readings, although the move was hardly greeted warmly by Regional Council itself, with Mayor Geoff Dawe sounding off against the move to elect the Head of Council despite receiving a clear endorsement from Aurora Council.

Currently, the position of York Regional Chair is appointed by Regional Councillors, and not necessarily from amongst themselves. Regional Councillors are entitled to nominate anyone they see fit for the position.

The position is currently held by Wayne Emmerson, former mayor of Whitchurch-Stouffville, who was formally appointed at the start of this Council term in a contest which included Newmarket Regional Councillor John Taylor.

I am delighted the government ran with my private members' bill to make the position directly elected, says Mr. Ballard. Every time this issue arises, whether in the media or just meeting people in the community, more and more people come forward to tell me how important it is to elect the Chair of York Region. People understand how powerful this position is and, frankly, they are incredulous when they learn that it is not an elected position. They have encouraged me along the way to continue to push for it.

Even when I became Minister and realised I could no longer move the bill along, I was pretty sure the government would run with it. I have been confident all along and I think the encouragement I have gotten over the past year has only increased.

Since he put his bill forward, Mr. Ballard says he has not had any substantive discussions with Regional Members, but he rejects some of the concerns they voiced around the Council table that direct election of the Regional Chair would favour more the more populous municipalities in York Region's southern tier, leaving the Northern Six (or N6) at a distinct disadvantage.

That is not necessarily so, says Mr. Ballard. There are historic rivalries within York Region that could position the N6 quite well to have significant influence. At the end of the day, it is like becoming a Town Councillor in Aurora. You might live in a certain part of the Town but your job is to be a Town Councillor for all the residents of Aurora, just as the Chair has to and will understand that their job is to represent the wishes and the needs of the entire community, of the entire York Region. It is how democracy works and I don't have those concerns.

Frankly, I think if anything this will allow people who live in the Northern Six to more equitably voice their concerns during election time.

At the end of the day, he says this is all about democracy and individual York Region residents having a direct say in who leads them. It is one of the most powerful positions in the area, he contends, and it is important for voters to have the opportunity to ask what their prospective chair's vision might be for the Region and, if they have previously served on Regional Council, explain some of the decisions the Region has made over the previous four years.

People have expressed to me concerns over the Region's growth plan, the Region's debt, and a lot of those things, says Mr. Ballard. I think this will give members of Council and people who are running for this position an opportunity to explain why the Region is where it is at right now. It is transportation issues, transit issues, debt issues, all of those issues that are Regional. I think they will be able to more easily talk to and hold their elected officials accountable. I also think it will, in some ways, give the Regional Chair the legitimacy it needs when that chair negotiates or talks with local Councils and local elected officials, and officials at Queen's Park.

Coming to Queen's Park as an elected individual versus an appointed individual I think lends more credence to the issues coming forward and I think when a Regional chair who is elected by York Region is discussing issues with local Councillors and local mayors, there is an understanding that they are coming from a perspective of this is the people's will, rather than this is the chairperson's will.