

Elected Regional Chair moves forward -- without Regional support

By Brock Weir

?If it ain't broke, why are we trying to fix something that ain't broke??

That was the question asked by Markham Mayor Frank Scarpitti last Thursday as Regional Council voted 14 ? 5 against electing their Chair.

While Regional representatives signed off on undertaking a governance review of their wholesale structure, which could ultimately include options on the Chair, they decisively voted down Regional Councillor Joe Li's motion calling for the head of Council to be elected directly by the residents of York.

The election of a Regional Chair has been a hot button issue around the table of many of York's municipal Councils, including here in Aurora, which voted 8 ? 1 last year in supporting Councillor Li's motion.

At that time, Mayor Geoff Dawe was the lone dissenting voice but, come last Thursday's meeting, he was in the majority with his Regional Council colleagues.

?I think this Council is committed to looking at the process long-term [but] I cannot support this motion because I believe [it doesn't] represent what I believe needs to happen,? said Mayor Dawe at last week's meeting. ?It doesn't represent a driver I believe is there. Transparency has been mentioned and I defy anyone on this Council, or anyone in York Region, to show where we have not been transparent in how we operate. I take great offence when people say that because it is a really easy thing to throw out. You don't have to back it up.?

Responding to a delegation made that morning from Markham Councillor Karen Rae, in which she said it was incumbent for the people sitting around the table to represent the views of their respective Councils, Mayor Dawe said he came to the table with a unique perspective on the issue.

?If I understood the [the delegation], I am obligated to follow the wishes of my Council although I am the only one who represents the Town of Aurora at this Region. I am elected to that role. At our Council, I vote against endorsing Councillor Li's motion and it was eight to one. Although I was elected to represent the Region, I was voted down because I believe there is a better option.

?How does it make it better that you would actually be elected? How does that position change? How does that change how we operate here? How does it improve what we're doing? We have discussed a number of things over the last number of weeks, things that are truly important to moving this Region forward. How is an elected Chair going to help me solve the GO Parking problems in Downtown Aurora at our train station? I don't see how any of that is going to help our community move forward and that is why I will not support the motion on its own.?

What he did support was a plan to look at the governance model.

?From my perspective, this Council functions very well,? he said. ?For representation by population, we are fairly represented; we have five per cent of the votes at this table and we have about five per cent of the population, so that works out quite well.?

His primary issue, however, remains that if he can't make a Council meeting, as Aurora's lone representative, the Town does not have a voice at the table. Mayor Dawe said when situations like these arise, he often asks his colleagues from Newmarket and Markham to put forward a deferral until he is able to speak on an issue and that ?usually will happen.?

?We are very fortunate to have that collegiality at this table, but I don't believe it is the proper form of governance to actually run it,? he said, advocating for an alternate representative for the community, if not an additional seat at the table.

'I say this tongue in cheek, but Georgina has a lower population than Aurora, but they have two representatives,' said Mayor Dawe. 'If we were going to fully enforce representation by population, we would remove one seat from Georgina. I don't see anyone putting that forward. We have adapted before and I think it is an opportunity for us to adapt again. I do believe a Made in Aurora solution is best for the Region of York.'

The Region of York might not have the opportunity, however, to form a 'Made in York Region' solution as the Province is moving swiftly towards legislation that would ensure the Region elects its Chair in future elections. This legislation was introduced by Newmarket-Aurora MPP Chris Ballard.

This rankled many members of the Regional Council table who questioned why York was being specifically targeted rather than Regional Councils Ontario-wide. They also took issue with what they said seemed like a hasty process, not being formally informed of a public information session hosted by the Region until the eleventh hour.

'I do believe in fairness to the local municipalities in that a governance review would not go astray,' said Regional Chair Wayne Emmerson, former mayor of Whitchurch-Stouffville. 'Some of the issues here are very dear to some of the municipalities, especially the composition of Regional Council. I did meet with the Chairman of Waterloo and he says the best thing he ever did was a direct elect to Regional Chair.'

'He said it changed that Council dramatically and it really works out the best he's had it working. I said, 'I don't think you would around this table because you do have that give and take. Yeah, we disagree, but we do move items forward and get things done and it is because of the great staff we have here and also because of the working conditions around this table.''