

Hopefuls line up to succeed Bill Fisch as Regional Chair

By Brock Weir

In just under a month, York Regional Council will be convened.

Many around the Regional Council table were re-elected last month, but there will be some new faces just getting their feet wet in the process. Whether they are newcomers or old hands in this, they will be united in their first task: electing a new Regional Chair.

Among the leading contenders to succeed Bill Fisch are Wayne Emmerson, outgoing Mayor of Whitchurch-Stouffville, who did not seek re-election to the post this year, and Newmarket's recently re-elected Regional Councillor John Taylor, while former Aurora councillor Alison Collins-Mrakas has also expressed an interest.

"I have been on Regional Council as Mayor for 17 years and I really like being a part of the Region," says Mr. Emmerson. "[I see the position as one] to more or less coordinate all nine municipalities with what their needs are in their municipalities, particularly continued growth and infrastructure. There is community and social housing, and social issues from health to helping seniors. I want to bring 20 strong individuals with strong views together for the betterment of York Region."

That task, he adds, should not be too difficult knowing the majority of the players not only around the Regional Council table, but also working behind the scenes at Regional Headquarters in Newmarket. They are a diverse group around the table representing very different areas with very different needs, all looking to make sure they get their fair "piece of the pie."

Whoever ultimately takes the helm in December, the next four years promise to be a period of transition for the Region. While Mr. Emmerson was a voice, along with Aurora and King, on getting an extra voice at Regional Council – a request which was denied by the others – he says he is hopeful that the Province of Ontario is going to look at the structure of Regions such as York both in terms of the number of representatives available for each municipality, but also how the Regional Chair is selected.

Over the last several years there have been mounting calls to have the Regional Chair become a position elected directly by voters, but things remain status quo this year and contenders will be elected by the 20-strong Regional Council.

This is a process Mr. Emmerson says he would personally like to see maintained as the Regional Chair technically does not have a vote and it is their job to pull everyone together.

Looking ahead, he sees transit and infrastructure as the top issue facing the Region over the next term. There will also be increasing drivers for assisted living, affordable housing, and providing more rental opportunities to residents throughout York Region. Rounding out his top three priorities is working down the debt at the Regional level, making sure it is controlled and going no farther.

Similar issues have been put forward by Mr. Taylor, who cites management of the Region's debt and financing as a particular cause for discussion.

"It is a significant budget of \$3 billion annually and we have to manage a considerable amount of debt because of massive infrastructure projects required to support the growth that is occurring by demand [of growth]," he says.

As the Region grows, so too do the demands on transit and transportation. "Moving people" is a top priority for the Region's consideration over the next four years, particularly addressing congestion issues, road enhancements, and traffic technology, including traffic lights, to better address how traffic moves. Transit talks will also be a significant factor as work progresses on extending subway lines into Vaughan. The Region will work "tirelessly" over the next eight years to also bring the subway extension to Richmond Hill, and working with the Province on all-day GO.

"Most important in that scenario is making sure we can do everything we can to affect the mobile split, to get more people onto

transit," says Mr. Taylor. "There is no question we have to continue to expand our road network and make improvements to the lane widths, intersections, traffic light timing, technology, and everything like that. We also have to simultaneously have a complete review of the best practices around.

"We have to continue to understand the importance of developing the human services network necessary to support a rapidly growing region of 1.2 million, and that includes services for new Canadians. We have done some work recently on the phenomena of the aging population and the structures we need to put in place to support an aging population."

Mr. Taylor says he believes it is important to have someone with a long-term vision for York Region as Chair, and bringing the visions of the 20-strong Regional Council together. It is also important to have someone who will have a strong voice at the Provincial level, something he says he would be able to provide due to his past work at Queen's Park.

"The Region works and functions by making sure the federation of nine municipalities is represented by those 20 people moving forward together," he says. "Certainly I have passions and ideas around where the Region needs to be looking and thinking about, but we need to do that collectively."

He is keeping his eye on possible reforms to Regional governance as well that could be handed down from the Province, something that former Aurora councillor Alison Collins-Mrakas says she is looking at as well in exploring a bid for the Regional Chair herself.

She says she believes an elected chair moving forward into future terms would "strengthen" the role and provide a "clear mandate."

"Given the importance of the position, it should be something to what is already in existence in other Regions," she says. "The Chair should be an elected position. Would I support it? Absolutely. Would I publically speak to it? Absolutely, but I don't think the role of the Chair is to advocate anything beyond what has been advocated by the majority of Council. The only agenda of the Chair should be the collective vision of Regional Council."

So, why is she interested in seeking the position?

"I have been highly involved and engaged in politics within Aurora and the Region," she says. "I think I have something to contribute at the Regional Level. A number of issues that are facing the community are pan-Regional, certainly environmental issues like source water protection and transit issues. Other issues like electrical power access are pan-Regional issues I think require an approach that looks at integrated decision-making and integrated planning. That requires consensus-building at the Regional level and I think that is definitely the role of the Regional Chair. Not activism, obviously, but facilitating the mandate of those elected members around the table."