

Mayor renews call for Regional review at Chamber lunch

Regional Council should be reduced to the mayors of the nine communities within York, says Mayor Tom Mrakas.

The Mayor renewed his calls for reforms to Regional government last week as he delivered his annual State of the Town address to the local business community at the annual luncheon hosted by the Aurora Chamber of Commerce.

While Mayor Mrakas stressed he was not advocating for the dissolution of York Region, he was advocating for an overhaul on its primary decision-making body.

I'm calling for a body composed of just the nine York Region Mayors. This would expedite critical decisions, allowing new programs and services to launch faster and enable quicker adjustments when needed, he said. Mayors like me already represent their entire municipalities and have broad mandates to make decisions for all voters. Streamlining governance at the regional level would eliminate unnecessary delays, improve service delivery, and potentially save taxpayer money.

There are also practical opportunities to improve efficiency. For example: road maintenance. We're seeing it right now [in the snow]. Currently, the Region often plows the road while the Town plows the sidewalk on the same stretch this duplication is inefficient and should be handled by local municipalities. A regional governance review could help identify and eliminate even more of these redundancies.

In his call for a governance review, Mayor Mrakas also renewed his calls for a fire service shared Region-wide.

It's also a chance to explore shared services that could benefit residents and save taxpayers even more money. One prime example is fire services. I have long believed that a single, unified fire service for York Region would improve service for all residents. Aurora and Newmarket successfully integrated their fire services years ago and it has led to a significant improvement in service.

Further consolidation would allow for better strategic planning of fire station locations; for example, leading to improved response times and more equitable coverage across the Region.

We must embrace innovative ways to improve service delivery, enhance efficiency, and make life better for our community members especially during this period of economic anxiety and uncertainty.

Regional Governance is an issue that has cropped up at the Aurora Council-level regularly.

In the previous two terms of Council, there have been calls for having an additional voice for Aurora at the Region in addition to that of the Mayor of the day. In the event an additional seat was denied, Councillors also discussed appointing an alternate to represent the Mayor at the Region should they not be available.

Following the lunch, The Auroran reached out to the Town's six Councillors for their thoughts on the Mayor's proposal. Responses were received from Ward 1 Councillor Ron Weese, Ward 2 Councillor Rachel Gilliland, and Ward 5 Councillor John Gallo.

Respondants had mixed feelings about streamlining the Regional Council structure.

Presently, the existing democratic principle of representation by population provides additional Regional Councillors for municipalities that have higher populations and therefore they have greater voting power when making decisions, said Councillor Weese. With nine Mayors and 12 Additional Regional Councillors, smaller municipalities like Aurora, who do not have additional representation, seem to have less power at the Regional Table. But we also have to realize that while we send about 44 cents of every tax dollar to the Region, our tax base is smaller. The larger municipalities send greater gross taxes to the Region and considering that, the increased representation seems democratically sound.

?This appears to be about increasing the power and influence of smaller municipalities which may be beneficial for Aurora. Richmond Hill, Vaughan and Markham would lose their voting power relatively speaking.?

Councillor Rachel Gilliland too noted the population difference between York Region's northern and southern tiers, and suggested that if Regional representation was reduced to nine, the votes of Markham and Vaughan might be weighted differently.

?I am still of the opinion that municipalities should have an elected Deputy Mayor of some sort who has an alternate perspective or presence on the Regional Council and I am not so sure that having just nine is the way. It's a little bit preliminary, in my opinion,? she said.

?Ultimately, I would prefer to have more representation from Aurora than just one specifically. I would like to see Aurora actually have a Deputy Mayor and an extra seat. I know East Gwillimbury has an extra seat. I think Markham and Vaughan have a lot of representation that they can tend to run the Regional Council vote differently and we have to rely on the northern six to band together if there is something specific to our Towns that might be more similar in size and needs. I think there is a little more to it than just cutting Regional Council positions and scaling down to nine.?

Councillor Gallo noted that while he would prefer more representatives on Council, if there is only one, he would like a representative that ?should truly represent the views of Council.?

?We are never asked and never told what has been communicated,? he claimed.

Aurora had the unofficial position of Deputy Mayor up until the introduction of the Ward System in time for the 2022 Municipal Election. In the previous At-Large Council structure where Council members were elected to represent the community as a whole rather than a specific area, the position was determined by the highest vote-getting Councillor.

Councillor Harold Kim, who now represents Ward 6, was the most recent person to serve as permanent Deputy Mayor of Aurora. The position is now taken in rotation.

Regional updates are included on the monthly Aurora Council meeting agendas.

By Brock Weir