

Mayors to fight to make sure amalgamation doesn't happen: Mrakas

By Brock Weir

York Region mayors will fight to make sure 'that crazy word 'amalgamation' doesn't happen,' according to Mayor Tom Mrakas. Amalgamation was the word left hanging in their air after the Province announced it was moving forward with a review of Regional Government.

'Our government committed to improving the way Regional Government works and we will be looking at ways to make better use of taxpayers' dollars and make it easier for residents and businesses to access important municipal services,' said Steve Clark, Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing in a statement.

Along with last week's announcement came the appointment of two advisors who will be tasked with exploring 'opportunities to make it easier for residents and businesses to access municipal services; processes to deliver efficient and effective local services that respect taxpayers' money; methods to make municipalities open for business; and possibilities to cut red tape and duplication and save costs.'

The Province's announcement came as Mayor Mrakas joined his GTA counterparts for the first of what he hoped would be continuing meetings to discuss projects and initiatives that are of interest to all municipalities, including integrated transit. He told Council following that meeting in Toronto that 'all the Regional representatives will continue to fight hard and advocate to make sure that the crazy word of 'amalgamation' doesn't happen.'

'Everyone can be guaranteed that we, at the Regional level, will do our best to make sure that doesn't happen, but that we work towards providing the best possible governance model for our residents.'

That being said, however, Mayor Mrakas told The Auroran on Wednesday that the review is 'welcome' as the Region of York voted last year to conduct a governance review for this term, and that there might be opportunities for Aurora in this Provincial Review process.

'As elected officials, it is our responsibility to look at ways that we can provide better services ' better services for less dollars ' and look at those efficiencies within our local government,' says Mayor Mrakas. 'We hear the rumours of what the Provincial government is possibly looking at doing. From my perspective, it is important that we make sure that each municipality's uniqueness continues to be at the forefront and is not compromised by making it seem like you're doing it to be efficient. That speaks to the amalgamation aspect of it.'

As much as municipalities look at efficiencies, Mayor Mrakas says he will be continuing his advocacy for a second seat for Aurora at the Regional Council table during this review.

'I know it will be very difficult considering what everyone believes is what the Provincial Government is looking for,' he says, 'but, at the end of the day, from what I am reading and what I have seen from the press release and all the information out there so far from the Minister of Municipal Affairs is that they are asking for input from municipalities, the mayors, councillors, from the Region, so that they can do a full, comprehensive consultation process and look to how to better provide government and the services for the residents of all the regions and all the communities and municipalities. From that aspect, I think it is important that I get across the point that due to our population we're underrepresented at the Region and we need that extra representative there.' Another focus, he says, will be advocating for the amalgamation of the Central York Fire Services, the force which serves both Aurora and Newmarket, with Richmond Hill, an idea he has long-championed.

'What can we do to essentially pull together some services that can be uploaded to the Region that make sense and that's one of them I think is a big one,' he says. 'This is probably the right time to do that and I think that is also going to be part of that review. I will be pushing for it, I will be speaking to my colleagues about it, saying this is what we need to do to tell the province we know what we need within our backyard and let us do our jobs and we can provide the most efficient government for our communities. If they let us do it, we will figure it out and we can come up with the solutions to become more efficient.'

'The reason there is some optimism is because with Toronto they came down with the hatchet. There was no consultation. There was no conversation. The province came in with the hatchet and said, 'This is what we're doing. Too bad.' This process has already started differently. They have come out and they have said a proper consultation process, they are going to listen, they are going to talk with everyone, and I believe the quote from the minister himself is that this is not being done with a hatchet, it is being done with a handshake. We're optimistic and I think it is way too early to be discussing the possibilities of amalgamation or all that because there is no talk of that right now.'