

POLITICS AS USUAL: Dancing with two left feet

By Alison Collins-Mrakas

This week, the Standing Committee on the Legislative Assembly will hear the last of the delegates who wish to speak for ? and I would assume, perhaps, there might be one lone soul against ? MPP Chris Ballard's Bill 42 to bring York Region into the 21st century and require the election of the Regional Chair.

These hearings on the Bill fall hard on the heels of a recent York Regional Council vote; 14 out of the 20 members voted against the Bill to give residents the right to have a direct say in who sits in the most important chair in the Region.

A disappointing, but not surprising outcome, but it makes no matter. The Bill has across the board support at the Province.

Opposition and Government MPPs alike support electing the Regional Chair. Why? Because it makes sense. Appointments are an anathema to open and transparent government and fundamentally at odds with the concept of democracy.

Some folks have intimated that the change is unnecessary; that it is simply a change from one form of election to another. Indeed, the Regional staff report speaking to the motion repeatedly referenced ?election by Council? (current state) versus ?direct election? (proposed state), the subtext being, why bother with a change when the Chair is already ?elected??

But, that's a dance of semantics with two left feet.

The Chair is not elected by the members of Regional Council. He is appointed by the members of Regional Council. It is misleading and inaccurate to state otherwise.

Section 4 of Regional procedural by-law, ?Appointment of Regional Chair?, states ?the appointment of the Regional Chair shall be conducted at the inaugural meeting of Council.? Not election of the Chair, the appointment of the Chair.

Couldn't get any clearer, can it?

Let's stop playing Words with Friends and stick to the facts, shall we?

I have heard a lot of chatter about the role of the Chair, most of it along the lines that it is a largely ?ceremonial? role, the Chair has no ?real? power. That couldn't be further from the truth.

Indeed, the Chair's salary alone ? \$250,000 annually ? belies that argument.

The Chair is the face of the Region. He is the CEO, he sets the agenda for the business of the Region, but most importantly, the Chair has the power to cast the deciding vote on matters that divide our community.

When a matter is before Regional Council, and the vote is split, it is the Chair who decides how the matter will be resolved. That's hardly a position of ?unimportance.?

There is significant support for an elected Chair amongst elected representatives across the Region. Yes, 14 out of 20 around one Council table ? the Regional table ? voted against an elected Chair, but fully 33 out of 43 elected Council members around five Council tables in the Region DO support the election of the Chair.

That translates to 77% of elected members of Municipal Council who have been asked to vote on the matter.

I understand that change is hard. Folks like things to continue as they are because they're comfortable with it. But, with respect, just who is comfortable with it? Certainly not the residents of York Region, the elected members of five Municipal Councils, our MPPs, etc.

So, I say get on with it. Let us move on to more important considerations ? you know, like transit, debt, infrastructure, housing?