

Province to grant Aurora 'Strong Mayor' powers this fall to address housing

Aurora will receive 'Strong Mayor' powers from the Province of Ontario this fall pending a housing pledge, Premier Doug Ford announced at the Association of Municipalities of Ontario conference on Monday.

So-called 'Strong Mayor' powers grant Heads of Council – in Aurora's case, the Mayor – the authority to forge ahead on matters that advance Provincial priorities, including the ability to veto bylaws that are deemed to contravene Provincial authorities, such as housing goals.

Aurora is one of 21 further Ontario municipalities expected to have populations of 50,000+ by 2031 to receive Strong Mayor powers effective October 31, 2023.

'We're extending Strong Mayor powers to another 21 municipalities that commit to Provincial housing targets; specifically municipalities projected to have populations of over 50,000 people by 2031, will become eligible for Strong Mayor powers and the Building Faster Fund – as long as the Heads of Council provide written confirmation to the Province that they pledge to meet their housing targets,' said Premier Ford on Monday, referring to a new Ontario program that will provide municipalities financial incentives to meet these targets. 'These municipalities will no longer be required to provide a Council-endorsed housing pledge and that is because we want more municipalities to be eligible for the Building Faster Fund sooner.

'We hope and expect Mayors and other Heads of Council will work with their colleagues to ensure a Council-endorsed pledge to demonstrate their shared commitment to building. Together, the Building Faster Fund and Stronger Mayor powers are providing municipalities with tools to build homes and build them faster.' According to Ford, the Building Faster Fund is a three-year \$1.2 billion program that will reward municipalities for reaching their municipal housing targets.

'These targets will be ambitious but realistic,' he said. 'For the first year of the program in 2023, we want to achieve at least 110,000 new housing starts. It would be the first time in over three decades that Ontario surpassed the 100,000 threshold. From there, we will ramp up over time until we are on track to build at least 1.5 million homes. Municipalities that reach over 80 per cent of their target each year will become eligible for funding based on their share of the overall goal of 1.5 million homes. Municipalities that fail to reach at least 80 per cent won't be eligible.'

Monday's announcement will see the Town of Aurora ramp up on delivering its own housing pledge.

On June 27, Council adopted a motion put forward by Mayor Tom Mrakas directing staff to identify a 'locally appropriate' housing target to meet needs and demand through to 2031. The motion also tasked staff with developing a Municipal Housing Pledge that 'affirms the Town's commitment to accelerate housing supply in partnership' with the Province of Ontario.

When Council passed the motion before the summer break, the deadline for these documents to come back to Council for consideration and approval was set for December 15.

But Mayor Mrakas tells The Auroran that these draft documents were recently set to come before Council in September.

'The pledge was in draft form and it was actually going to be on September's agenda before we even knew what the Province was doing,' he said. 'It was already coming to Council. I can also confirm that the number that was identified by the Province somehow mysteriously is the exact same number that we had in our draft report that no one had seen yet.'

That number, he said, was 8,000 new housing units in Aurora by 2031.

Touting his Housing Supply Action Plan earlier this week, Premier Ford billed it as setting 'ambitious targets for growing cities and municipalities.

“It has cut costly red tape while reducing municipal fees and taxes on purpose-built rental as well as affordable and attainable housing,” said Ford. “Through our transit-oriented communities, we’re planning for density right next to transit. We’re unlocking lands to build more than 150 homes and residences for 150,000 people. That is the same as adding a city the size of Guelph, Milton or St. Catharines and after decades of stagnation we’re starting to see results against challenging headwinds”. When it comes to building more homes, we need to work together: the federal government, the provincial government and municipal governments. All have a role to play.”

Municipal governments in Ontario first received Strong Mayor powers last year, beginning with the Mayors of Toronto and Ottawa, and the number of municipalities that have received them will top 50 by October 31.

During the 2022 Municipal Election Campaign, as candidate, Mayor Mrakas said he thought Strong Mayor powers were “not necessary and not needed” but at that point, the Provincial Government had limited such powers to communities with a population of 100,000 or more.

“It’s kind of a moot point discussing Aurora and I don’t expect [it] to ever come to Aurora” and I am actually kind of thankful for that,” said Mayor Mrakas at a candidates meeting last fall.

But it’s coming and October is just around the corner ” and Mayor Mrakas said in a statement the devil was in the details.

“Recognizing the urgency of the housing crisis affecting every community across Ontario, the Province of Ontario has created new tools and policy mechanisms to address this crisis,” he said. “The Town of Aurora has already demonstrated its commitment to addressing the housing crisis in our community and will continue to work together, Council, residents, and with the Province, to ensure we meet the housing needs of current and future residents in a manner that is appropriate and in alignment with our Official Plan. I will be awaiting the particulars of the newly-announced Building Faster Fund to see how our Town stands to gain in accessing this critical funding.

“As I’ve said before, I don’t think [Strong Mayor powers are] a tool we necessarily need, but it is a tool that the Province has now given us. And there could be certain situations that arise in the future where Strong Mayor powers could be useful, specifically when it comes to accelerating housing. But I want to be very clear that I think our current Council works very well together, and I’m committed to working with my Council colleagues to make decisions that align with our Official Plan, provincial priorities, as well as the shared vision we have with community members on how we grow Aurora.”

By Brock WeirEditorLocal Journalism Initiative Reporter