

Region delays elected chair vote

By Brock Weir

York Region residents will have to wait a little longer to find out whether Regional Council wants their leader to be elected by the people.

Regional Councillors voted Thursday to defer a vote on a motion brought forward by Markham Regional Councillor Joe Li to support a move from Newmarket-Aurora MPP Chris Ballard in the Ontario Legislature calling for the Chair to be elected by a Region-wide vote until January at the earliest.

While Regional Councillors voted for a delay to allow a further report on the options available to them, as well as a rundown on how Regional Councils around Ontario select their respective leaders, some around the table said by the time this comes back to York the Province may have already made the decision on their behalf.

'Ultimately I have been told that MPP Ballard is going to put this through,' said Regional Chair Wayne Emerson, former mayor of Whitchurch-Stouffville, who was appointed to the position last year by a vote of Regional Council. 'Bill 42 is going through. Let's move on with it. Make your decision, but I don't think it is going to be your decision. The Province is going to make it happen.'

This was a view shared by John Taylor, Regional Councillor for Newmarket, who said if a decision was not made last week, the Region 'will have abdicated its opportunity to take a position.'

'We are talking about whether or not we are going to allow the people of York Region the right to elect the Chair of York Region,' said Taylor. 'Are we going to allow them that right or say to them, 'No, you can't vote for that, we will, assuming we know better on how to make that decision.' It is time to allow the people of York Region to make the choice on their own behalf. If you want to simplify the discussion: because it is 2015.'

Aurora Mayor Geoff Dawe went into last week's discussion with a 7 ? 1 vote from Aurora Council supporting Mr. Ballard's motion. While Mayor Dawe was the lone dissenting vote locally (Councillor Paul Pirri was not present for last Tuesday's Special Council meeting called to discuss the matter), he initially said he was in favour of having the debate then and there.

Ultimately, however, he supported calls from Newmarket Mayor Tony Van Bynen that the vote be delayed in favour of a wholesale 'comprehensive' governance review on how York Region itself operates, including a report on addressing representation for communities like Aurora that have just one representative around the Regional table.

'I think York Region deserves a Made in York Region solution,' said Mayor Dawe. 'The MPP is putting through a bill that strictly affects York Region. I think we have to have our input and I believe that input needs to have more than just an elected chair. I don't disagree with the process of an elected chair [but] I think there are other issues that have to be addressed at the same time.'

For some Councillors, however, a move to tack a complete governance review onto a vote on whether or not the Regional Chair should be elected was ultimately unwieldy.

'This thing is growing a lot of legs here,' said Councillor Danny Wheeler of Georgina. 'We started out with one specific issue and now maybe we're going to end up as the City of York if we keep going the way we are. Just be careful what you ask for.'

Ultimately, Regional Councillors split the vote, voting in favour of holding off their vote on electing a Chair until January or February. A separate vote on a separate report on addressing other changes that might be considered on the structure of York Region also passed.

In the lead-up to the votes, several delegates addressed Regional Council in favour of electing the Chair, the majority of whom

hailed from Aurora.

Leading the delegations was Councillor Michael Thompson who said electing the Regional Chair was a matter of accountability. If Councillors at the Regional and Municipal levels are accountable to the public through the Municipal Election, the Chair should be held to the same scrutiny, he said.

“43 per cent of Aurora's tax dollars go to the Region and that is a significant portion,” said Councillor Thompson, questioning what say residents of any York Region municipality have in how their dollars are spent. “Being more accountable means giving the residents a voice [on] who will lead the Region. In an elected system, candidates for the Region Chair will share their vision for the Region with their local municipality on how they plan to address the issues that matter most to our residents.

“They would be required to provide a platform on how they envision our Region growing over their term of office. Right now we have no idea what, if any, thoughts the Chair had for Regional growth, Regional transportation, affordable housing and other such matters. Residents have the right to know what the most powerful and highly paid person in York Region stands for.”

While some around the Regional Council table, particularly Markham Mayor Frank Scarpitti, questioned the “power” invested in the Chair, as he or she holding the position is ultimately only one vote in a tie-breaking situation, he said it is time for a change.

“I truly believe this time the Province will mandate the change, that they will decide an elected Chair's time has come, it is in our best interests to act upon this opportunity, make an effort to work with the Province to develop a Made in York Region solution, one that could possibly address some of the concerns or obstacles I have heard other members state, but we won't know if we don't take the first step. Now is the time.”

Adding his voice to the discussion was 16-year-old Ben Williamson, a student at Dr. G.W. Williams Secondary School. Mr. Williamson told Council that he was there “fighting for his democratic rights” and was “alarmed” when he learned the Chair was appointed by Regional Councillors.

“This person operates a budget of \$2.3 billion, represents the Region on national and international stage, oversees large capital projects [and] I would like the ability to voice my opinion on who carries out this enormous responsibility,” he said. “It is my personal belief that the way to ensure the public has a voice in Regional decisions is to make the Chair an elected position. After all, Canada is a democracy where the people's voice matters.”

For local businessperson and former Council candidate Anthony Pullano, it was time for politicians to look at the “greater interests of his fellow citizens” and make the move.

“Bill 42 is all about voters being able to discern and vote for the Chair at election time,” he said. “This goes hand in hand similar to voting for mayor, Councillor, MPP and MPs. Voting is democracy. It is patently logical that citizens be able to vote and elect the York Region Chair. Some say elections are costly as opposed to appointing the Chair. That is a two-edged sword. When it comes to our constitutional right to exercise our vote where many have given their lives to preserve that right, the monetary cost of free election is a burden that Canadians and this Canadian voter are prepared to pay. We obviously pay for everything else.”