

## Region leader could get 'Strong Chair' powers: Province

The head of Regional Council could soon get 'Strong Chair' powers to advance Provincial priorities in legislation proposed by the Ministry of Municipal Affairs.

The Better Regional Governance Act, 2026, was announced Thursday and could give the York Regional Chair as well as the Chairs of Durham, Halton, Muskoka, Niagara, Peel, Waterloo, and the Warden of Simcoe County a new range of authority similar to 'Strong Mayor' powers to deliver on government priorities such as housing and infrastructure.

Thursday's announcement noted the Ministry will continue to appoint the Chair of the Regional Municipalities of York, Peel, and Niagara, a move last made locally when former York Regional Police Chief Eric Jolliffe was tapped to succeed outgoing chair Wayne Emmerson, former mayor of Whitchurch-Stouffville.

The Province has also given itself the power to appoint the heads of Durham, Halton, Muskoka, and Waterloo, some of which are democratically elected. The heads of Council in Durham, Halton, and Waterloo are directly elected by voters, while the heads of Peel, Muskoka, and Simcoe County were appointed by Council members. Prior to the 2022-2026 term of Council, the head of the Regional Municipality of York was appointed by members of Regional Council.

'We will always support our municipal partners, both lower- and upper-tier, in delivering locally-led solutions that offer better value for taxpayers and speed up decision-making,' said Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing Rob Flack. 'These changes provide the necessary tools for local leadership to advance our shared priorities and better serve our communities, including by expediting housing and infrastructure development.'

Proposed 'Strong Chair' powers within the legislation, which is likely to pass with the Progressive Conservatives' majority government, will 'mirror' Strong Mayor powers afforded to the heads of Councils in communities like Aurora. This, according to the Province, will provide 'more efficient, streamlined local decision-making, enabling them to deliver faster results for residents and support efforts to advance shared provincial-municipal priorities.'

Amendments in the legislation could further amend how Regional Council votes are counted by introducing weighted voting rules for upper-tier municipal Councils like York's following this fall's municipal election.

Mayor Tom Mrakas, who serves as Aurora's representative on Regional Council said that while the move to give Regional leaders 'Strong Chair' powers could help advance business, there needs to be clear rules to minimize any 'conflicts' between Regional and Local governance and leaders.

'Today the province moved to strengthen and streamline decision-making at the regional level in Ontario which includes adding 'strong chair' powers. Municipalities like Aurora are already operating under Strong Mayor Powers (SMP). Adding 'strong chair' powers at the regional level could help move regional matters forward but it will be critical to ensure clear roles and alignment to avoid overlap and minimize conflict between local and regional decision-making,' said Mayor Mrakas in an April 2 statement.

'That said, how this new legislation is implemented in practice will be key to its effectiveness. If done right, these changes can help accelerate housing and improve coordination but they must work with municipalities, not around them. I had also hoped to see this legislation address the size of York Region Council. I've long advocated for a streamlined model reducing Regional Council from 22 members to the nine mayors to deliver real cost savings, improved efficiency, and strengthened accountability. I continue to hope that these changes are forthcoming.'

More changes could be coming down the line, the Province hinted.

'All regions must review their council composition following the 2026 municipal election,' said the Ministry. 'Niagara Region

would be exempt in 2026 and would return to regular reviews after the 2034 municipal election. The government will continue working with municipalities to identify ways to strengthen local governance in Niagara, Simcoe and beyond. Working together to advance shared provincial-municipal priorities helps advance housing and economic development, preparing both individual municipalities and the province as a whole for growth.?

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