

Strong Mayor powers rejected by Council, but likely coming anyway

Aurora lawmakers have rejected Strong Mayor powers on paper, but the decision is not likely to change the outcome.

Last week, Council, upon a motion from Ward 1 Councillor Ron Weese, formally rejected Strong Mayor powers, which could be a significant shift in how municipal decisions could be made going forward.

This fall, Heads of Council in nearly 30 Ontario municipalities ? in Aurora's case, the Mayor ? are set to receive the new powers, which will give them the authority to override Council decisions that are deemed not in line with the Province's housing goals, but also the power to hire and fire municipal staff, reorganize municipal powers, and more.

Premier Doug Ford announced Strong Mayor's powers with a call for municipalities to formalize a Housing Pledge to the Province. As of October 3, there has been no indication from the Provincial government would put their plans for Strong Mayor powers on the backburner, which could render the passage of Councillor Weese's motion more symbolic than anything else.

?My motion is not about this Mayor, it is not about this Council, it is about all mayors and all Councils,? said Councillor Weese. ?Strong Mayor powers extend far beyond building homes faster and reaches into democracy that is so valued by most people. The concept of majority rule is central to every western democracy and these new powers extend far beyond the issues of building homes; it extends to the hiring of the CAO, hiring and the firing of certain municipal department heads, and this comes right from the Provincial website? proposing the municipal budget with Council vetoes and Council override processes in place. It allows vetoes of certain bylaws that in the Mayor's opinion might interfere with provincial priorities that would require only a one-third majority to pass.?

Passing the motion, he contended, would be a declaration that Council members ?respect the residents who voted for them, will support the democratic rights to govern our municipality, and will vote for retaining local municipal control of our destiny.?

In stating her opposition to Strong Mayor powers, Ward 2 Councillor Rachel Gilliland agreed it was not about the Mayor or Council of the day, but rather about maintaining democracy.

?Strong Mayor powers with no end in sight and a wide range of vague authority to be given to any Head of Council, even if it were myself at the head of Council, that is not how we were elected to represent the people,? she said. ?However, if the true intent of the province was to address the housing crisis situation, then I would consider a temporary power shift given only to reduce red tape decisions in favour of advancing provincial housing target priorities such as OLT (Ontario Land Tribunal) and, as such, I strongly urge the Province to amend those tools accordingly.

?However, that is not what the limited tools that are being offered or beholden to us are. Rather, it is the ability to rule without a democratic majority, without being required to give any account of him or herself by the usage of vague political priorities that ebbs and flows indefinitely among other powers not related to housing at all and therefore who can solely make decisions [for the people] to suit his or her own interest. This, my friends, can be interpreted as a style of governing that I cannot and will not support.?

Ward 5 Councillor John Gallo was on a similar wavelength, suggesting a motion limiting the usage of Strong Mayor powers to matters related to housing, but pressed Mayor Tom Mrakas whether he was prepared to execute the powers once they are granted.

During the 2022 Municipal Election campaign, Mayor Mrakas as candidate was clear in his view that these powers were not necessary and Councillor Gallo questioned whether that was still the case.

While Mayor Mrakas said receiving the powers was a Provincial decision and not his, Councillor Gallo insisted executing the powers was a different matter ? but Mayor Mrakas said he wasn't ?going to get into hypotheticals and what-ifs.?

?It is your choice,? Councillor Gallo contended, stating the Mayor could state he would not use them. ?I don't know how else to ask you this, but as of right now, my impression is that you will be, as you see fit, executing them, which means you're accepting the Strong Mayor powers.?

Added Ward 3 Councillor Wendy Gaertner: ?It's simple ? Strong Mayor powers are anti-democratic and contrary to a Councillor's job to represent their residents. I am definitely opposed to Strong Mayor powers in any municipality.?

During the debate over the motion, Mayor Mrakas was mum on his own position regarding Strong Mayor powers outside of the buck ultimately stopping at Premier Ford and his government whether or not they are granted.

Vocal support for these powers, however, came from Ward 4 Councillor Michael Thompson and Ward 6 Councillor Harold Kim.

In his support, Councillor Kim said Strong Mayor powers aren't dissimilar to American systems of government where the Mayors of Chicago, Los Angeles, New York City and more have executive authority.

?To say it is not democratic, I think, is incorrect,? he said. ?I don't think the Mayor should be allowed to unilaterally execute everything and I think there [are] sufficient controls in this case. If people are concerned about a mayor gone mad, there are mitigation measures in place. For instance, you just need two-thirds of Council to offset whatever the Mayor is deciding upon. Unless you think there are two other Councillors who are also mad, then it would certainly be a bad year for everybody, wouldn't it?

?Coming into Council, I questioned why does the Mayor only have one vote because [running for and being mayor] is certainly the most resource-needing position to run for and it takes a lot of resources, it takes a lot of effort, and you're running because you want to put your vision (in place). I always thought the mayor should have a little bit more leverage than a Councillor because it certainly requires more resources to get there. Otherwise, why bother having a mayor??

Councillor Thompson agreed similar structures have been in place ?for decades? in the United States and since these powers were granted to the Mayors of Ottawa and Toronto more than a year ago, ?I have yet to hear of any concerns?from the Councillors within the system nor have I heard of a mayor executing the veto power.?

?As far as I know, Toronto and Ottawa continue to operate business as usual, reports are put before Council, Council votes on it and it is majority rule,? he said, before referencing financial incentives put in place by the Province for municipalities that meet specific housing targets. ?Personally, I don't think it is fair to say it is undemocratic. It is recognized as a democratic system of governance for municipalities. However, I do understand the concerns being voiced by members at this table that they are not supportive of it. They prefer the status quo?and that is fair, that is their opinion. But it is also important to remember that Council has a fiduciary responsibility to the taxpayers and we must ensure the municipality does not lose potential funding.

?Strong Mayor powers are coming; it's a question of what's going to be done going forward. We're all accountable to the public. There is a process in place that should the mayor ever utilize that veto power he needs to explain it both in writing to members of Council but to the public and they will be the judge.?

In addition to Toronto, communities close to Aurora that currently have Strong Mayor powers include the Cities of Mississauga and Brampton, and the Town of Caledon, where Caledon Council has expressed concerns over how Strong Mayor powers have been used to dismiss and hire senior municipal staff and to reorganize departments ahead of Peel Region's dissolution in 2025.

Councillor Weese's motion was passed on a vote of 4 ? 3, with Mayor Mrakas and Councillors Thompson and Kim voting against.

By Brock WeirEditorLocal Journalism Initiative Reporter