

VIEW FROM QUEEN'S PARK: Time to elect the Chair of York Region

By Chris Ballard, MPP
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Winston Churchill once said democracy is the worst form of government except all the others that have been tried. I'd like to give democracy a try when it comes to electing the Chair of York Region.

You may not be aware that the most powerful municipal political position in the Region is an appointed one. The Chair is not directly elected by voters, the chair is appointed by members of Regional Council. In fact, the Chair does not even have to be an elected official, for example a Mayor or a Regional Councillor. They can be anyone who simply lives in the region.

In Aurora, the Mayor is our representative on Regional Council. Newmarket is represented by both a Mayor and Regional Councillor.

Many of us living in the region don't think it is right that this powerful political position is not directly elected by citizens. That's why, almost a year ago, I tabled a private members bill ? Bill 42 ? that, if passed, would make the Chair of the Region of York an elected position.

I am pleased that Markham Regional Councillor Joe Li has asked Regional Council to support my private member's bill. His motion, tentatively scheduled to be debated November 19, was seconded by Whitchurch-Stouffville Mayor, Justin Altman.

A move to an elected Chair of the Region would bring York Region in line with the majority of regions across southern Ontario. Of our immediate neighbours, only Peel does not have a directly-elected Chair, although, at the urging of former Mississauga Mayor Hazel McCallion and Brampton's then-Mayor Fennel, the Region is undertaking a study.

Both Durham and Halton Regions have moved to direct election of their Chairs. Clearly, change is in the wind.

My bill is not an attack on York Regional Chairs, past or current. I simply believe at election time it is important that voters be able to question a candidate for Chair about their vision for the future of the Region ? and to be able to vote for their candidate of choice. Are you concerned about budget, debt, growth, public planning, the environment, or level of service? An election is a good time to put those questions directly to a Chair.

Although not elected, the Chair is a very powerful position. The Chair can cast a tie-breaking vote at Council; the Chair helps direct the creation of the budget; and the Chair has a say on what makes it to Council agendas, and what gets before Council for debate. The Chair also has a strong say in who sits on what Region Committees.

I am not saying these shouldn't be roles for the Chair of the Region ? just not for a Chair who isn't directly elected by citizens. Perhaps when the Region was newly formed in the early 1970s, when pressure from growth was virtually non-existent, appointed Chairs made sense. But today the Region is in a period of rapid growth. Over one million people call the area home, and thousands more arrive each year. By 2031 our population is expected to hit 1.5 million people. The Region's budget topped \$2.7 billion in 2015 and its debt is now around \$2.54 billion, and expected to hit \$3.7 billion by 2020.

York Region is no longer a sleepy region, and citizens should have the right to question those vying for the top job at the Region. Some argue, as well, that an elected-Chair is more accountable throughout their term.

As an MPP, I only get to introduce one private members bill each year, so I must choose wisely. I chose this bill based on input I'd received as an Aurora councillor, and as a candidate for MPP. Bill 42 is my first bill, and I was glad to lean on the expertise offered by MPPs Dr. Helena Jaczek and Reza Moridi. Both had brought forward their own bills calling for a direct election of Regional Chair, but neither bill moved forward because elections were called.

My bill sailed through first and second reading with unanimous support from all parties and all members in the house. It is now waiting at Legislative Assembly Committee to be debated.

I have talked with a number of Mayors and Regional Councillors and find there is quiet but strong support for my bill. Those who oppose it generally fall into the ?we've never done it that way, so why change now?? category.

There are legitimate concerns about how a candidate for Regional Chair would finance their election campaign. Others worry that future Chairs would be decided by the more populous southern communities.

I believe the candidate who will get elected is the one with the best vision and track record. Besides, there is no guarantee that a Chair elected from the northern end of the Region would best serve this area ? one could argue Chairs are currently beholden to those regional politicians who appointed them.

Our citizens deserve the right to directly elect the powerful Chair of York Region. The winds of change are blowing ? by working together we can bring real democracy to York Region.

I invite you to contact me on any issue. Please call my community office at 905-750-0019, or visit my website at www.ChrisBallardMPP.ca. I look forward to hearing from you.