

Province begins review into regional government

By Mark Pavilons

The Ontario government is moving ahead with a review of regional government.

Premier Doug Ford successfully reduced the size of Toronto City council prior to the fall's municipal election. He had also wanted to make the position of regional chair an elected, not appointed position, but this move was put on the back-burner.

By appointing Michael Fenn and Ken Seiling as special advisors, the Province is picking up where it left off in its review of regional governments.

The regional government model has been in place for almost 50 years in Ontario and "we are taking steps to ensure that regional governments are working efficiently and effectively. These advisors will consult broadly over the coming months and provide recommendations to improve governance, decision-making and service delivery," according to a statement from Queen's Park.

The review will examine Ontario's eight regional municipalities (Halton, York, Durham, Waterloo, Niagara, Peel, Muskoka District, and Oxford County), the County of Simcoe, and their lower-tier municipalities.

"Our government committed to improving the way regional government works and we will be looking at ways to make better use of taxpayers' dollars and make it easier for residents and businesses to access important municipal services," said Steve Clark, Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing.

The advisors will work with the province to explore:

? Opportunities to make it easier for residents and businesses to access municipal services.

? Processes to deliver efficient and effective local services that respects taxpayers' money.

? Methods to make municipalities open for business.

? Possibilities to cut red tape and duplication, and save costs.

Local residents and businesses will be consulted this spring.

A statement from York Region notes council "appreciates strengthening regional government is a priority for the Ontario government and one they campaigned on last year. This is consistent with our council's commitment to continuous improvement and meeting the changing needs of our growing communities.

"In discussions with the premier and minister, we are supportive of this review. We look forward to the opportunity to work with our provincial partners to explore ways to optimize service delivery and reduce costs. Our input in determining what is working well in our current model and what may be improved will be critical to this process.

"As we too, undergo our own Municipal Comprehensive Review, we have a responsibility to ensure we maintain a clear perspective focused on the priorities that matter most to our communities.

"Our goal remains the same; help ensure we are building healthy and complete neighbourhoods where residents of all abilities and ages can live, work, play and thrive."

York Chair Wayne Emmerson said they knew the review was coming and the premier made it clear. He said it's beneficial, as long as all the partners are at the table.

"It's a good exercise to see how we can do things better," Emmerson said.

York, he pointed out, is considered the "heavy lifter," in terms of the services they provide for residents, including waste disposal, social services and health programs.

Regarding municipalities, Emmerson said most taxpayers want their local councils to remain intact.

Regarding Bill 66, Restoring Ontario's Competitiveness Act, Chair Emmerson said they need time to review it thoroughly. Red tape, he said, really drags the Region, and some applicants down, and he does see some benefits to fast-tracking certain applications. He welcomes the proper planning tools so the region can expand its employment lands. He also stressed, "we're not going to build on sensitive lands," regardless of provisions of Bill 66.

An Act to establish The Regional Municipality of York received Royal Assent on June 26, 1970. The Regional Municipality of York was established in 1971 to replace York County.

On Jan. 1, 1971, these villages, towns, townships and police villages were consolidated into nine new municipalities, which exist to this day.

York Region's first term of council ran between 1971 and 1973 and had 17 members representing the needs of their communities.