

Province pushes for elected chair in York

By Mark Pavilons

Despite voting to maintain the status quo in York, the province seems intent on making the chair an elected position.

York regional councillors last Thursday voted 14-5 against a motion that calls for an elected chair.

Since York Region was established in 1971, the regional chair has been elected by members of regional council. In 2012, a similar motion was defeated by council in favour of retaining the status quo.

Interestingly, the province, on the day before the regional council meeting, announced public meetings into Bill 42, which would mandate an elected chair in York. Bill 42 seeks to require the regional chair to be elected by a general vote beginning in the next municipal election in October 2018.

The issue is being promoted by Chris Ballard, MPP for Newmarket-Aurora.

‘Allowing the public to directly elect the chair of the Region of York is a fundamental democratic right,’ said Ballard. ‘When the Region was founded in 1970 there were about 44,000 people living here. I remember those days, having been born and raised in King City. Today, the Region is home to about 1.2 million people and it is time to update the old election model. With more than one-third of homeowners’ municipal tax dollars going to fund the Region, the Region accounting for significant municipal debt, and the important role the Region plays in land development, roads and public health, it’s time the public had a means to directly question candidates for the chair’s position, and not have that powerful position decided behind closed doors.

‘I know some regional councillors and mayors have concerns about my private member’s bill, and so I encourage them to listen to the public and develop a made in York Region solution that addresses the need for direct elections and is ready in time for the next municipal election.’

Councillors did direct staff to undertake a comprehensive governance review, which would include a review of the makeup of council and the issue of an elected chair.

‘I am not against an elected chair, I am against the private member’s bill targeting York Region alone,’ said King Mayor Steve Pellegrini.

‘If the province wants reform it should be across the province. What about our neighbour to the west ?? Peel or our neighbour to the north ? Simcoe. They should also look at themselves and reflect on the fact that the Premier is not directly elected either along with the many appointments to different boards, senators, Judges etc.

‘This would be the 4th largest election in Canada and candidates would need to raise in excess of half a million dollars. My concern is where would donations of that kind come from??

In June 2013 Oak Ridges-Markham MPP Helena Jaczek introduced Private Member’s Bill 16 that, if passed, would amend the Ontario Municipal Act to make the position of York Regional chair elected as opposed to appointed. Although the bill received unanimous support at second reading, it died on the order paper because of the 2014 election. It was then re-introduced by Ballard in 2014 as Bill 42. MPPs Frank Klees and Reza Moridi previously introduced the same bill.

‘I was disappointed to learn that Regional Council voted against supporting Bill 42 considering the majority of York Region’s municipalities that represent roughly 50 per cent of its population voted in favour,’ Jaczek said. ‘Considering the rapid expansion of York Region in the 45 years since it was established, the responsibilities of the regional chair have dramatically evolved from a purely administrative position to one that is responsible for large budgets, critical decisions and essential services that affect the lives of more than one million people. The regional chair holds a tremendous amount of influence over York Region, and as such, should be directly elected by the people.’

Despite being considered several times over the past 40 years, there have been minimal additions to the composition of York regional council. Between 1971 and 2003, council representation increased to 21 from 17. Between 2003 and 2015, York Region’s population increased by more than 36 per cent to almost 1.2 million, but no new representatives have been added to reflect this growth.

The Standing Committee on the Legislative Assembly will meet to consider Bill 42, An Act to amend the Municipal Act, 2001 to provide that the head of council of The Regional Municipality of York must be elected.

The committee intends to hold its final public hearing Wednesday, March 2.

People who wish to comment on the Bill may send a written submission to the Clerk of the Committee by 6 p.m. on March 2.

An electronic version of the Bill is available on the Legislative Assembly website at: www.ontla.on.ca.