

Better Regional Governance Act sparks concerns over local representation

By Riley Murphy

Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

On April 2, the Ontario Government introduced the Better Regional Governance Act, 2026, which would not only give the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing the power to appoint upper-tier Council Chairs in Regions such as Peel, but also give these upper-tier Council head "Strong Chair" powers, which mirror "Strong Mayor" powers.

The Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing (MAMH), through this legislation, would have the power to appoint upper-tier council chairs in eight regions: Peel, Durham, Halton, Muskoka, Niagara, Waterloo and York, as well as the warden of Simcoe County.

A press release stated that Regional chairs in the eight municipalities listed above would receive "Strong Chair" powers that mirror "Strong Mayor" powers, providing "streamlined local decision-making, enabling them to deliver faster results for residents and support efforts to advance shared provincial-municipal priorities."

Regional Councillor Mario Russo highlights that this legislation is "not proposed, but happening."

"Many residents feel their voices were not heard or they were not consulted, to that I say, we are in the same boat, and we had no input on the matter either," he says.

Russo says that these are some of the frustrations that local governments have with the decisions of upper tiers.

"We often wear it without the authority to do anything about it."

Turning to a positive note, he adds that the governance model was left alone, with the sole change being the Regional Chair position and its appointment, and greater powers.

"I have some concerns here as well, but I feel strongly our current Regional Chair will be reappointed, whom has always been a fair and reasonable person, but what if he is not? That can raise some anxiety, as we in Caledon have the smallest share of representation already and if a Chair is not reasonable we would possibly be left holding the shortest straw," says Russo.

But he says, again looking at the positive side, there were many more negative proposals that had been floating around "the rumor mill," including possible reduced representation and possible amalgamation, which he says he would have opposed.

"We have before us a piece of legislation that I personally feel could have come with more information and with more public consultation, but considering the potential negative prospects that we could have been subjected to, I am satisfied the legislation presented will have limited impact on our overall Regional Governance, with some concerns still swirling but the overall matter being not at the top of the list of concerns to be focused on," says Russo.

Regional Councillor Christina Early says that in Caledon, planning decisions matter a great deal to the community, and she thinks changes like this could have an impact on how those decisions are made.

"It is important that local priorities continue to be heard, that Caledon's interests are properly represented, and that we do not lose the checks and balances that support a healthy local democracy," says Early.

She adds a provincially-appointed Chair with Strong powers could also make advocacy more difficult if the role is focused more on

advancing provincial direction than on balancing the needs of individual municipalities.

?I do not support Strong Mayor or Strong Chair powers. I believe local government should be rooted in democracy, where decisions are made openly, with accountability, and with the voices of Councillors and residents at the table. When too much authority is concentrated in one office, it weakens that balance and takes decision?making further away from the people it affects,? says Early.

?My job is to speak up for Caledon residents and make sure their voices are heard, and that responsibility becomes even more important when the structure of local government changes.?