

Editorial ? Electing the Chair is not a benefit

Just because a concept is good does not always make it desirable, and there seems to be such a case rising these days.

At their last meeting, more than a month ago, Peel Regional councillors agreed to set up a task force to look into how the Regional Chair is determined.

The current system for choosing a Chair, and one that has been in place since the Region was formed some 40 years ago, has the elected members of Regional council getting together at their first meeting after the municipal elections (now held every four years) and picking a Chair who will preside over their meetings for the rest of the term.

The system has seen some changes over the years. Back in 1991, when there were several people vying for the job, the election of a Chair involved a confusing process of elimination. In the end, Emil Kolb got the job with considerable points to spare. There was a challenge for the Chair's job in the aftermath of the 2010 elections, with Kolb again winning, but this time it was by secret ballot among councillors.

That shows there's always room for change and thinking of new and different ways to do things.

It is a fact, however, that the system has worked rather well. There have been few, if any, public outcries over the leadership Kolb has provided over going on 22 years. And we are aware of no demands from the taxpaying public to change things.

One possible benefit, we will grant, is if councillors pick one of their fellows to be the Chair, then would that councillor's seat have to be vacated, leading to a byelection just weeks after the official campaign has ended? That does seem wasteful, does it not?

Granted, electing the Chair at large sounds more democratic, and we will always be quick to defend democracy. But is it beneficial? For one thing, there is already a form of democracy involved, inasmuch as it's the elected councillors who pick the Chair. And that proves to be a benefit in a number of ways.

Under the current system, the Chair is accountable to council, speaking and acting on behalf of those elected members. That means he or she has the endorsements of council as a whole.

That will not always be the case if the Chair is elected at large. With a mandate from all the voters, that person would be able, with considerable justification, to assume a greater degree of authority than is currently the case. That could lead to more friction between the Chair and councillors. We're getting demonstrations on how unproductive such an arrangement can be in Toronto these days, with apparent and repeated efforts to undermine Mayor Rob Ford on the part of some City councillors.

And how receptive are the Mayors of Caledon, Brampton and Mississauga likely to be to having a duly-elected Chair holding considerable clout over their municipalities?

As well, we have a hard time seeing how Caledon can benefit from such an arrangement.

The Region is currently made up of three components; Mississauga, Brampton and Caledon. It's well known that Caledon is the smallest of the three. Thus it would possibly be easy to brush Caledon aside as politicians seeking to be Chair devote their efforts to the vote-rich cities to the south.

In addition, there is the cost of mounting a campaign on such a large scale. There are eight federal (and provincial) ridings within Peel Region, along with a large chunk of Dufferin-Caledon. This would not be one of the local elections that we have grown used to over the years. This would be a race for a high political office, with party politics possibly playing a greater role in things, not to mention involvement from other levels of government, like the Province.

When dealing with the institutions of government, it is always advisable to keep studying them. We should always be on the lookout for better ways of doing things. But by the same token, we should not be too quick to chuck something out, especially if it's working. And we think that is the case with the way Peel Region's Chair is selected.

In the final analysis, we think the words of Caledon Councillor Richard Paterak, spoken at the Regional council meeting at which the creation of the task force was approved, might end up making the most sense ? 'On the surface of it, I'm of the belief, 'If it ain't broke, don't fix it.'?