

General election of Peel's Regional Chair to be studied

By Bill Rea

A task force is going to be looking into whether the voters should decide who the Chairman of Peel Region should be.

Regional councillors last Thursday agreed to the formation of a task force to look into how the Chair is determined. It will also be looking into the possibility of increasing Brampton's representation on council.

The chair is currently appointed by secret ballot by Regional councillors at their inaugural meeting right after municipal elections, and that person is appointed for the term of council.

A staff report to council stated Halton Region has been electing its chair at large since 2000. A bylaw was passed by Durham Regional council last year that will see a general election of a Chair there in 2014. The Chair is still appointed by council in York Region, but staff said a private member's bill has been put forth by Oak Ridges - Markham MPP Dr. Helena Jaczek to have the Municipal Act amended to require the Chair be elected.

Mississauga Mayor Hazel McCallion put forth the motion to set up the task force, consisting of the mayors of the three municipalities, the chair, the chief administrative officers of the Region and municipalities and the Regional Clerk.

McCallion observed the trend seems to be moving toward having chairs elected at large, adding that would "bring it into line with democracy."

"It's been on the burner for a while," she added. "I think the time has come that we should look at it. That's all I'm recommending."

One of the problems McCallion pointed to regarding the current system is if a sitting councillor runs for Chair and is elected, that person's council seat will be vacated very early in the term, possibly requiring a by-election.

"It seems in other regions, it's an issue," she said.

Brampton Mayor Susan Fennell agreed.

"How can you not move into the most democratic process we could possibly have?" she asked.

Caledon Councillor Richard Paterak pointed out that mayors and chairs do not have extra powers, meaning they only get one vote at the council table. He added the Regional Chair only votes to break ties, and he didn't think Emil Kolb had been called up to vote yet in this term.

Paterak also pointed to the need to have a chair who's able to work with council, and under the current system, councillors pick someone who has the best interests of the Region at heart.

He also pointed out that the general election of the Chair will involve a lot of money. "All of a sudden, it becomes a big-dollar venture," he observed.

But Paterak did say he favoured the creation of the task force, and urged the members look closely to see how things have been working out in Halton, in terms of efficiency and cost.

"On the surface of it, I'm of the belief, 'If it ain't broke, don't fix it,'" he remarked, adding he's heard no calls from the public to change the current system.

Brampton Councillor Elaine Moore pointed out the motion was only calling for an investigation and report. She also expressed a little surprise that the election of the Chair in 2010 was decided by secret ballot.

"I believe in the direct election of the Chair," commented Mississauga Councillor Bonnie Crombie, but she agreed the matter requires study. She raised the issue of the roles and responsibilities of the three mayors versus an elected Chair.

The task force is due to report back to council Sept. 26. Mississauga Councillor Nando Iannicca tried unsuccessfully to get it put back until October, adding it might be hard to get everything lined up when staff are taking vacations. Both Fennell and McCallion agreed if there are going to be changes in place in time for the next term of council, things have to move fast.

"Leaving it to October could be a problem," McCallion said.