

Peel will look for another configuration of council

By Bill Rea

When it comes to a position on the future configuration of its council, Peel Region doesn't have one, at least at this time.

Councillors spent about two hours last Thursday debating whether to hold a public meeting on the proposed changes for the next term. But several Mississauga councillors said they would veto what's been proposed, so the meeting would be a waste of time.

Regional councillors last year narrowly approved a model that would see the body grow from 24 to 32 members. There would be four additional councillors from Brampton and another four for Mississauga, with Caledon keeping its five reps.

A triple majority is required to change the composition of council. That would include the approval of a majority of the municipal councils in Peel representing at least a majority of the registered electors (voters) in the region. That means the City of Mississauga would have the necessary numbers to be able to veto any proposed change.

A staff report that went to council last week suggested holding the public meeting April 27.

Regional Solicitor and Director of Legal Services Patrick O'Connor told Mississauga Councillor Carolyn Parrish the public meeting is required for the process to continue, but she was still opposed to holding it.

Mississauga Mayor Bonnie Crombie agreed, stressing it's unreasonable to add eight new councillors and that she plans to resist it. She also agreed the meeting would be a waste of time and money.

"There are lots of other alternatives," she maintained.

"I think this is our last kick at this," Brampton Mayor Linda Jeffrey remarked. "Our residents are underserved and we don't accept the status quo."

"You are politicians who are not supporting public consultation," Brampton Councillor Michael Palleschi told his colleagues from Mississauga. "Good luck to you."

Brampton Councillor Martin Medeiros agreed not holding the meeting would be in contrast to the values the Region is supposed to represent.

"This is almost anti-democratic," he declared, adding the public needs to have the opportunity for input. "This is not what we should be doing."

Caledon Mayor Allan Thompson observed that if Mississauga councillors don't like what's been proposed, the solution might be to get input from the community.

"We need public engagement," he said. "You have nothing to lose and there's nothing to fear."

Brampton Councillor John Sprovieri didn't think the public would be happy with an expanded council. He agreed there should be a public meeting, but with different numbers. He suggested adding the four councillors he said Brampton needs, and keeping the Caledon and Mississauga numbers where they are now. He wondered how residents would react to that.

O'Connor told him they can't go to the public with new figures because there's no resolution authorizing them.

Parrish put forth another model, which would see Mississauga get another councillor, two more for Brampton and Caledon gives up one. She also said things need to get moving if the new numbers are to be in place for the 2018 municipal elections. If Brampton wants more representation, the councillors will have to work with Mississauga, she added.

Crombie thought that was reasonable, agreeing Brampton deserves more representation.

"The problem is we're out of runway," she said.

Caledon Councillor Annette Groves said the Province should have taken this task on.

She added she could understand the position of Mississauga, but pointed out Caledon is growing too.

She also appreciated the need for the public to be consulted. Groves reminded her colleagues that they were angry when the Province passed legislation calling for the election at large of the Regional chair, without consultation.

Mississauga Councillor Jim Tovey used to be a community advocate before getting on council, and he said public consultation doesn't always live up to its billing. He likened it to asking people "what colour would you like that blue car to be?" He also said if the province were running the consultation, it wouldn't be consulting, but telling the public.

Tovey said he would be ready to look at alternatives, such as weighted votes at council.

He suggested Mississauga could keep its current 12 councillors, but each one could get one and one-third votes at the Regional table.

Caledon Councillor Barb Shaughnessy thought the matter could be solved by simply giving Brampton the extra councillors they need. She was concerned that Mississauga councillors seemed to be saying it didn't matter what they might hear from the public.

"We have to hear from all sides," she said, also pointing out that Caledon has always worked with Brampton and Mississauga.

Brampton Councillor Grant Gibson suggested it's time to take a look at the size of Caledon council, and maybe reduce it.

'It's long overdue,' he said.

Brampton Councillor Elaine Moore said giving more councillors to Brampton won't mean more politicians, as some of the City councillors will take on Regional seats.

She also agreed that weighted votes might be the solution.

'If this was easy, it would have been done a long time ago,' Jeffrey remarked. 'I'm not here to be reasonable. I'm here to represent Brampton.'

'This triple majority is strangling us,' she added.

Mississauga Councillor George Carlson agreed the weighted votes could be the way to go. He added the weighting could be adjusted in the future, as needed.

O'Connor told Gibson council could ask the Province to legislate a solution. But without a definite position from council, it would just be a request.

While a number of councillors spoke in favour of weighted votes, O'Connor said they couldn't decide on that route right then. He said the Province had authorized the public meeting of the proposal council had already approved. Another proposal would have to go to Queen's Park.

'I would like us to be able to come up with a made in Peel solution,' Tovey remarked. 'It's time we looked at it.'

But Crombie argued this was not simple. She said it needed a staff report and more discussion.

'I think we're all getting a little bit lost in the weeds,' Caledon Councillor Jennifer Innis remarked, observing there needs to be a complete process. She also agreed the Province needs to step in on this.

'We are not going to find a solution that we're all going to agree upon,' she said.