

Thompson accepts next Chair will be elected at large

By Bill Rea

There's mixed reaction locally to plans to have Peel Region's Chair elected at large.

New legislation was introduced at Queen's Park last week that would see the Chairs of Peel, York and Niagara Regions directly elected for the next term, due to start late in 2018.

Under the current system in Peel, the Chair is elected to a four-year term by Regional councillors at their first meeting after the municipal election.

Municipal Affairs Minister Bill Mauro was quoted in the Toronto Star as saying the proposed changes will "help strengthen local governments and enhance their ability to serve the residents of their communities."

Caledon's representatives on Region council had varying views on the implications of the move.

"I accept that's the way things are going to be," Mayor Allan Thompson remarked. "We're now going to have a super mayor of the Region of Peel."

Thompson saw good and bad points in the legislation.

He said it will slow things down at the Region, and the elected Chair will have to listen more to the public, rather than concentrate on trying to get things moving.

On the other hand, he also said it should end bullying of one municipality on another, thus creating more harmony.

"Off the top of my head, Caledon will never have another Regional Chair," was the initial reaction of Councillor Barb Shaughnessy. Shaughnessy is in her first term as a councillor, and she recalled having trouble figuring out exactly what the role of the Chair is. "I don't know how the general public is going to figure it out," she remarked.

She agreed an elected Chair would be accountable to all residents, but added that should be the case anyway.

"I just don't think people understand what the job's all about," she commented, adding the whole thing is likely to come down to name recognition.

Councillor Johanna Downey pointed out Halton Region has an elected Chair and things seem to be working well there, but that didn't mean she was sold on the idea for Peel.

"The Chairs should be elected by the boards that they serve," she remarked, adding if they're elected by the public, it will result in something close to two levels of mayor.

"It will be interesting to see how it plays out," she added.

"I don't have an issue with the Chair being elected at large," Councillor Annette Groves commented. "By doing it, there's more accountability to the public."

She added there's an elected Chair in Durham Region.

"I don't think it's created any challenges or issues in Durham," she observed. "I think it's worked well."

Groves expressed disappointment that the three municipalities in Peel weren't consulted first. She said the matter had been raised by Brampton Mayor Linda Jeffrey at the inaugural meeting of Regional council in 2014, but there was no communication with the municipalities.

"We read it," she said. "There was never any discussion with us on this decision."

"I'm not in favour of general election of Chairs at large," Councillor Jennifer Innis remarked, adding it would create a super mayor.

Innis also pointed out people running for the office would have to raise significant funds, and the rules have been changed to prevent corporate funding. As well, she said an elected Chair would have a personal agenda, rather than the agenda set out by council.

Innis was another who was concerned that the election would fall to name recognition, rather than the best qualified candidate.

"One of the best and well-known Regional Chairs in the entire province was Emil Kolb," she commented, wondering if Caledon's former mayor would initially have been elected Chair if it was up to the public at large. "I kind of doubt it."

"I think it has repercussions for Caledon," Dufferin-Caledon MPP Sylvia Jones commented.

She said it hadn't yet been discussed among her caucus colleagues.

"Democratically elected is hard to argue against," she observed, adding there's been a lot of fighting between Mississauga and the other two municipalities in Peel. "Maybe this will actually solve some of that," she said.

Jones did point out the current trend is to have Chairs from Mississauga, and she wondered if such a person would be inclined to listen to everyone.

"It makes for a very strong Chair system," she added, pointing out once a Chair is elected, "you have a model where you have the right to speak very forcefully."