

VIEW FROM QUEEN'S PARK: Electing the Regional Chair

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A fundamental tenant of any democracy is the people's right to elect their leaders.

With that in mind, I've put forward the idea of resurrecting a private members bill that would see the Chair of the Regional Municipality of York directly elected by voters. The bill has been put forward twice before by York Region MPPs Helena Jaczek and Rezza Moridi, but died when elections were called.

I want your input about this idea. While many I've spoken with agree with the concept, others have expressed concern about the impact on smaller municipalities.

The role of Chair of the Region has evolved since its early days. When it was created in 1971, the Region had a population of 169,000. Today, the population is about 1.16 million. We are one of the fastest growing regions in Canada.

The previous bills proposed by York Region MPPs Jaczek and Moridi were about representative democracy and sought to bring more of it to the residents of York Region, something that is currently absent when it comes to the selection of the Chair of York Regional Council.

Having Region voters elect their Regional Chair will ensure direct accountability of the chair to the electorate. This has been a subject of discussion in York Region since at least 1995 when the topic was addressed as part of the York Regional Council Governance Review conducted as part of a project overseen by MPP Jaczek, then the Region's Medical Officer of Health. ?Only members of Regional Council were involved in that discussion, so, not surprisingly, no consensus was reached, and no action was taken,? said MPP Jaczek when she debated the Bill in parliament in June 2013.

There are many who argue that the appropriate governance structure is needed to reflect the changes to York Region related to population growth, budget and delivery of services.

York Regional Council is composed of 21 members. These members include nine mayors, 11 Regional councillors who are elected from the municipalities that make up the Region, and a chair. The number of representatives that each municipality elects to Regional Council ranges from only the mayor in smaller municipalities, like Aurora, to the mayor and up to four regional councillors in the larger ones.

Newmarket elects the mayor and one regional councilor to sit at the Region.

Absent, however, is an election for the Regional Chair. The chair is chosen by the 20 members of the council through a nomination process at the inaugural meeting of the Regional Municipality of York Council. It is possible for any member of council to nominate any resident of York Region. The individual nominated does not need to be an elected official.

MPP Jaczek told the legislature last June ?I've attended eight inaugural meetings of York Regional Council over the years, and only once, in 1997, was there more than one nomination for chair. In the other seven cases, there was an acclamation of the incumbent.? The Regional Chair and Chief Executive Officer (CEO), as the role is now called, is a position that holds a great deal of power over how the business of the Region is conducted. The chair sets the direction of council, has control over the agenda of council meetings and sits as an ex-officio member on all committees. In fact, the chair is the only member of council who works full-time on Regional business, as the other councillors must also attend to the business of their area municipalities.

The responsibilities of the Regional Chair have increased dramatically as York Region has grown. Today the Regional Chair is responsible for a budget of nearly \$3 billion, which includes \$1.2 billion for capital projects.

?It is astonishing that responsibility for these taxpayer dollars is vested in an unelected individual,? MPP Jaczek said in the Ontario parliament.

The Regional Chair is the official spokesperson for the Region and frequently has a role in representing the Region on the national and even international stage. An elected chair would give added legitimacy in this circumstance.

Allowing the citizens of York Region to elect their Regional Chair should help underscore the importance of the position.

If citizens elect the Chair of York Regional Council, the individuals who seek election will likely develop platforms that outline a vision for the Region. Upon election, accountability to the electorate will be clear. At the subsequent election, the electorate can judge whether the incumbent deserves re-election.

Through elections, citizens can play an active role in shaping their future. Important regional issues can be debated, and representatives can be held accountable by their electorate.

Tell me what you think.

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