

York 'mega-city' proposal nixed by Premier, Mayors

A pitch by Markham Mayor Frank Scarpitti to merge York Region's nine municipalities into one city appears dead on arrival after receiving push-back from many of his mayoral counterparts as well as Premier Doug Ford.

Aurora Mayor Tom Mrakas and King Mayor Steve Pellegrini were among the mayors who publicly disagreed with Pellegrini after he published an open letter calling on the Province to move forward with amalgamation.

The request came on the heels of the Ford Government's introduction of the Hazel McCallion Act, one which will dissolve the Region of Peel by 2025, leaving its three municipalities – the Cities of Mississauga and Brampton and the Town of Caledon – to go it alone.

'The provincial government has taken bold steps restructuring the City of Toronto Council and Peel Region and should be doing the same in York Region,' wrote Mayor Scarpitti in the letter dated June 14. 'There is no rationale for taking bold steps in other GTA cities and keeping the status quo in York Region. York Region has a total of 77 municipal representatives for 1.2 million people whereas the City of Toronto now has 26 municipal representatives for 3.0 million people. The combined operating expenses of all 10 municipal governments in York totals approximately \$4.4 billion. Consolidating into one city would result in significant savings in both operating and capital budgets. Municipalities invest millions in cybersecurity, water billing, tax billing, and recreational registration systems. A consolidated city will generate substantial savings.'

'Alectra utilities was created by merging Enersource, Powerstream, Horizon along with Brampton Hydro One. This consolidation saved \$310 million in operating expenses and an additional \$110 million in capital. I'm urging the provincial government to create a new streamlined governance structure for York Region. Municipalities have evolved, they deal with more complex issues, are expected to deliver more and we need an updated governance model from the one established over 50 years ago. In many respects, the foundation for one city is already present through our communities. We have single-tier school boards that serve the entire region, four hospitals that provide an integrated healthcare system for the entire region, and the major services already provided through the Region of York, including transit, Police, EMS and Public Health. I believe there are greater benefits to consolidating services in York Region than maintaining the status quo.'

Mayor Mrakas's statement against the proposal followed just a few hours later. In it, he said he was 'always open' to looking at efficiencies in government, but amalgamation is not the right road to go down.

'I strongly oppose the amalgamation of York Region into a single-tier megacity,' he said. 'It is quite disappointing that Mayor Scarpitti made such a statement – on such a complex issue that has a significant impact on people's lives – before reaching out to all York Region mayors to better understand their perspectives.'

'York Region municipalities are very distinct communities, spanning a large geographic area. We have distinct identities, histories, cultures and priorities. We know our residents because we are residents and Aurora Town Council and Town Staff have spent decades building relationships and continually improving the way we respond to the needs of our community. The decisions we make reflect the priorities of our residents, particularly when it comes to local planning issues, recreation, and arts and culture in our Town.'

'Aurora also greatly benefits from having many services and programs delivered by a regional government, while still having autonomy over important decisions on how we build our community. I have my own thoughts on how our regional government could potentially be restructured to strengthen service delivery and I will be bringing those ideas forward shortly.'

In the last term of Council, Mayor Mrakas had been an advocate for amalgamating fire services within York Region, but it's an idea that is yet to gain widespread momentum.

Disappointment was also expressed by Mayor Pellegrini who also questioned the 'unilateral' decision of Mayor Scarpitti to issue his statement.

'Amalgamating all the unique communities of York into one mega-city would take years and cost millions. Toronto's experience has shown the complexity and challenges. King is a unique community with equally unique strengths and challenges. We are proud of our rural character, rich natural heritage and agricultural roots. It's clear that with so many diverse communities across York Region, there is no 'one-size-fits-all' solution that can respect the local needs, character and values.

'The most compelling case against any move to create a mega-city are our citizens. Our recently completed citizen survey revealed that 95 per cent of them say the quality of life in the Township of King is good to very good, 80 per cent are satisfied with the overall quality of municipal services and 82 per cent expressed satisfaction with the level of service received. At the end of the day, this is a decision that rests with the Province. It has been very clear that it will assign facilitators in the near future to explore opportunities for efficiencies at the Regional level. We look forward to working through this process with the province and our partner municipalities.'

HAVE YOUR SAY ? Is a York 'mega-city' an idea worth exploring? Send your thoughts to brock@lpcmedia.ca.

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