

Durham council supports electing Regional chair

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DURHAM -- Durham Region is one step closer to electing the Regional chairman after councillors voted to move forward with the issue.

After a majority of voters in all municipalities voted yes on a ballot question to elect the Regional chairman, councillors considered a motion on Dec. 22 to ask the Province to pass a regulation which would allow Durham to start the process. This would include holding necessary public meetings and sending the issue to local councils for approval.

The motion passed in a 20-5 vote, with all five votes against coming from northern municipalities. Of the six north Durham councillors, only Uxbridge mayor Gerri Lynn O'Connor voted in favour of it.

Ajax Mayor Steve Parish, who has long supported electing the chair, thanked Regional chairman Roger Anderson for moving the issue forward and also thanked residents who have supported the idea over the years, including writing numerous letters to the editor.

"For the first time in 2014, the people will debate what the Region's priorities will be and how their tax dollars will be spent," he said.

Whitby councillor Don Mitchell pointed out there are still issues to be worked out before a chairman could be elected -- such as how to engage the electorate -- and said he hoped the Province would create a process that would apply to all municipalities.

"At the end of the day, we want this to be a change for the better rather than the other," he said.

Pickering councillor Jennifer O'Connell said although there may be growing pains, it was the right thing to do.

"How can giving the public a stronger voice ever be a step backward?" she said.

But not everyone was thrilled with referendum question and the subsequent request to the Province.

"I'm really disappointed the process is going the way it's going," said Brock Mayor Larry O'Connor.

He said he wished Regional council could have had a discussion on the issue and examined other options such as a county system where the Regional chairman could be chosen from among elected officials.

Mayor O'Connor also said the issue of electing the chairman was not a hot topic among residents during the election; issues such as the state of local roads drew more attention, and he added he didn't think there was a full discussion about the issue with constituents.

However, he seemed resigned to the change.

"I think the horse is out of the barn on this one and I think we've gone quite a ways down the road on this one and it's going to happen," he said.

Though he voted to support the motion, Whitby councillor Joe Drumm expressed misgivings, saying an elected Regional chairman may spell the death of smaller councils.

"I see it as the beginning of the City of Durham," he said. "We will put into one individual so much power, where he or she gets their power from is the southern municipalities."

Mr. Anderson said he expected lots of debate on the issue at local councils. After the Province passes the necessary regulation, at least five Durham municipalities representing at least half the population must approve it before it can be implemented.