

UPCOMING DATES

JANUARY

- 29 Brampton Committee of Council, 9:30 a.m.
- Durham Region Council, 9:30 a.m.
- Georgina Council, 9:00 a.m.
- Mississauga General Committee, 9:30 a.m.
- 30 Burlington Community Planning Regulation & Mobility Committee, 9:30 a.m.
- York Region Council, 9:00 a.m.

FEBRUARY

- 3 Aurora Design Review Panel (tentative), time TBC
- Brock Committee of the Whole, 9:30 a.m.
- Clarington Planning & Development Committee, 7:00 p.m.
- Markham General Committee, 9:30 a.m.
- Mississauga Planning & Development Committee, 6:00 p.m.
- Newmarket Committee of the Whole, 12:30 p.m.
- Pickering Planning & Development Committee, 7:00 p.m.
- Scugog General Purpose & Administration Committee, 1:30 p.m.
- Uxbridge Committee of Council, 10:00 a.m.
- Whitby Council, 7:00 p.m.
- 4 Aurora General Committee, 7:00 p.m.
- Burlington Community Planning Regulation & Mobility Committee, 6:30 p.m.
- Durham Region Planning & Economic Development Committee, 9:30 a.m.
- East Gwillimbury Committee of the Whole, 10:00 a.m.

REPRESENTATION BY POPULATION?

Andrew Reeves

A routine review of governance structure in **York Region** has been given a shakeup this year that could, if implemented, dramatically reshape its 21-member regional council.

As part of York's *Municipal Act*-mandated review of how it operates, in mid-January, **Town of Aurora** Mayor **Tom Mrakas** put forward a [motion](#) to regional council proposing that staff investigate structural reforms that could eliminate 11 regional councillor positions, shrinking council by more than half to nine mayors and one regional chair.

The proposal, Mrakas told *NRU*, has been a long time coming. "For so long at regional council, there's been arguments of proper representation-by-population," he said. While some municipalities are underrepresented, Mrakas believes, others are overrepresented. Currently, **City of Markham** has five seats on council, while **City of Vaughan** holds four, despite near identical population sizes and Vaughan's significantly higher growth rate. Meanwhile, **Town of Aurora**,

despite a larger population than the nearby **Town of Georgina** and a growth rate twice the size, holds just one seat at regional council to Georgina's two. "Why does Georgina have a second member and yet Aurora doesn't or **East Gwillimbury** doesn't?" Mrakas asked.

Georgina Mayor **Margaret Quirk** disagrees with the representation by population argument. She told *NRU* that between 52 kilometres of Lake Simcoe shoreline and a landmass roughly five times the size of Aurora, her municipality is unique within York Region and needs the two seats it was awarded when York Region was created in 1971 to ensure her constituents are heard at council. And besides, Quirk noted – there are more factors at play than population size when it comes to how many votes a municipality should enjoy at regional council. "I've said this before, and I'll say it again – representation-by-population is not the only thing to measure," she said. "Georgina has a very large, diverse community, and a lot of rural areas. Lake Simcoe is certainly a huge part of our

community and makes us unique within the region."

While York council has often considered how to rectify what Mrakas calls an imbalance in rep-by-pop, the proposed solution is often to add new members, he said, an idea that has gone nowhere. "Everyone on council is speaking, but you're not really getting new perspectives, new ideas. They're just hearing the same thing over and over again," he said. "My thought was 'How do we correct this issue for the long term? And 'How do we find a very cost-effective way of doing it that would allow for true representation-by-population to occur?'"

Reducing council's size is only part of the answer. By using weighted voting, council could allot each municipality a share of votes based on their percentage of York Region's population. "As municipalities grow, if there are any changes needed [to maintain an equal voting balance], you won't need to add another [elected] member – all you need to do is change the amount of votes that each member is given."

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Based on a regional councillor's annual salary of \$58,000, Mrakas said the elimination of 11 councillor positions could save taxpayers \$600,000 or more each year.

Quirk is unsure if cutting the number of regional councillors in favour of a weighted vote is the best course of action. "I don't know if that's something that would work for Georgina," she said. "I have to look out for the best interests of my constituents and what

will serve those residents best. That's going to be part of my discussion and comments at regional council and we'll see where some of my other counterparts want to head with this."

Ultimately, the Aurora mayor's motion may not be the only plan that ends up before council, York Region chair **Wayne Emmerson** told *NRU*. "I think the idea of Mayor Mrakas's motion was to put a proposal on the table and have

other ones come forward," he said. Other plans may surface from councillors or other municipal leaders with their own plans for how best to restructure council.

Some regional councillors are "a little concerned" about where the motion from Mrakas is going, Emmerson said. "There's always reaction when you take some jobs away." But would the reduction in council's size from 21 members to 10 impact the effectiveness of local representation? "I'm not sure," he said. "I'm not sure if it would have any effect on the City of Markham or the City of Vaughan or the City of **Richmond Hill**." The same may be true even for smaller

municipalities with fewer representatives at council. "Councillors say they're very valuable in their municipality and I would agree with that," Emmerson said. "But how many councillors do you actually need to look at regional issues in those areas?"

Mrakas knows that regional councillors could be worried by his motion, yet he's resolute that politics must be taken out of their decision making. "If we are to resolve the issue of representation-by-population and have a balanced approach to how voters are represented at our regional council, then there's only one way to do it in a cost-effective manner, and

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Current Use	Parking for YMCA (182 spaces)

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that's by doing it this way," he said. "If regional councillors are just thinking about their jobs, in essence, that's not the approach they should take."


Members of York council will have an opportunity to debate Mrakas's motion next month when the issue is brought before them. While a majority could vote down his proposal and opt to leave local governance as-is, Emmerson doesn't believe that will happen. While **Municipal Affairs**

and **Housing Minister Steve Clark** opted against forced amalgamations of Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area municipalities after the province's review of regional governments in September 2019, "I think the province is saying to us that the status quo isn't what they're looking for," Emmerson said. "I need council to sit and discuss this and put some ideas on the floor and let staff bring back a further report."

Whatever council decides, it faces a tight timeline and the need to secure triple-majority support before any changes to its structure come into force. Regional staff have until March to report back to council. A majority of council members would need to approve the changes by June; the proposal would then need to receive supportive by-laws from a majority of lower-tier councils whose populations form a majority within York Region. In order to impact the 2022 municipal elections, all approvals must be in place by December 2020. "It has quite a lengthy process to go through," Emmerson said.

Mrakas believes there's

appetite for his proposed changes, but also hesitation. Yet at this stage, he's hopeful that his fellow council members will, if nothing else, be curious to see what his proposal could look like in practice, as outlined in a staff report. "And then from there, we can have a conversation about whether this is the right way to go," he said. "If staff write up a report and present to us on what it would entail, I might change my mind and say, 'That might not be the best way to do it.' But without that information, we can't make that final judgment."

Andrew Reeves wrote this story on assignment with NRU. 

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