

President Abraham Lincoln once said “If you want to test a man's character, give him power”. This is so true of the election of the York Regional Chair. We have seen the manifestation of this statement by key players in the last election, the Chair, the Mayors, and the Regional Councillors alike.

It was reported that Regional Chair Wayne Emmerson opposes making the position elected because many residents do not understand the chairperson’s role. Let me ask - Do the residents even understand the Regional Councillors’ role? How many of the rookie candidates for Regional Councillor Races in the last election do you think truly understand what they are supposed to do if elected! We have to thank God that none of them were elected in Markham.

Emmerson also believes the mayors and regional councillors want to choose the person they want to lead them to represent the interests of the region as a whole. I think maybe he mistook their intentions to further their own agendas as such.

Right after the municipal election, Regional Councillors begin lobbying each other for support in order to get on a certain committee or another, or to be selected regional chair. This statement came from one of the insiders - “You support me on this and I will support you on that” – I am sure that statement really capture the essence of what is going on behind closed doors.

Direct election of a regional chair by electors is already practiced in Halton, Waterloo, and Durham – Three of the six Regional Municipalities in Ontario. It started with Waterloo in 1997, Halton in 2000, and Durham in 2014.

Ken Seiling of Waterloo and Roger Anderson of Durham were both elected Chairpersons under the old and secluded system of Regional Councillors at one time but made their transitions to the open and public election successfully. Regional Chair Gary Carr from Halton was a provincial politician and entered the race without facing an incumbent. He defeated the Halton CAO in a public election.

So, what does that tell us? We learned that voters may actually want to stick with people who are already on the job. When an incumbent is not running, even someone working within the regional political system is not necessarily a shoo-in for the job.

At this time, Bill 42 - a provincial legislation that would enable voters to select their York Regional chair is still a work-in-progress. But that does not stop us from a complicated “triple majority” exercise necessary to effect the change to public election of Regional Chair under existing provincial rules.

Under the current system, the York Region Chair has no mandate from the residents of York. It is in debt to the small circle of “voters” within the York Region Council who put him there. He will have to cater to their demands and not necessarily those of the Region’s in order to secure another term every four years. It is imperative that change must come and without further delay.

Some suggested that the existing system also allow for candidates from outside of the Region Council. I would like to point out that the Peel Region just experienced a “conflict of Interest” election where the winner voted for himself to break a tie and the other candidate was not allowed to vote because he was not a regional council member. While this was deemed legally acceptable, remedial actions have already been initiated to prevent this unfair practice in future.

The time to open up the election of the York Regional Chair to the public is now. Not only will it serve to eliminate all the horse trading within that Council, it will also make the process transparent and enable the Chair to effectively carry out his/her duties empowered by all the people who voted for this post. It is time to dispense with this “small circle election” within an “old boys’ club” and dump it into the ash heap of history.

On behalf of our Executive and its members, we declare our support for Councillor Rea’s motion.

Robert Mok - President, Downtown Markham Ratepayers Association (DMRA)