

Limerick gives letter of support against 'Strong Mayors' legislation

By Mike Riley

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At their meeting on Sept. 21, Limerick Township council discussed an item under communications and petitions in their agenda; a letter from the town of Kingsville against the Strong Mayors Building Homes Act that the provincial government recently passed into law, which could be adopted beyond Toronto and Ottawa in the coming months to include smaller municipalities. Council subsequently decided to send a letter of support also voicing opposition to the Strong Mayors Building Homes Act, especially as it could apply to smaller municipalities like Limerick.

The Strong Mayors Building Homes Act or Bill 3, received Royal Assent on Sept. 8, and it currently applies to the mayors of Toronto and Ottawa. It will come into force on Nov. 15, which coincides with the new terms of municipal councils after the election on Oct. 24. It provides new authority for the mayors of Ottawa and Toronto with regard to agenda setting, budget processes, and council bylaw decisions relating to prescribed provincial priorities. They can also appoint committee chairs, hire certain municipal public administrators and reorganize the public administration.

However, Premier Doug Ford said at AMO that he may expand the law to include the mayors of all Ontario municipalities going forward, and such an expansion of the mayoral powers by the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing Steve Clark to other municipalities, is included within Bill 3.

Critics of this legislation are against it overall, but especially for smaller municipalities, saying it will reduce checks and balances in municipal government, encourage cronyism within municipal councils and possibly lead to abuses of power from mayors who have these new expanded powers.

Ontario Green Party media relations officer John Chenery put forth this statement from Green Party leader Mike Schreiner, issued in response to the tabling of the Strong Mayors Building Homes Act by the Ford government, calling it yet another attack on local democracy disguised as a strategy to solve Ontario's housing crisis.

'The Premier claims that his government's strong mayors' legislation will let municipal leaders get housing built more quickly. But the provincial government already has many tools at its disposal to increase housing supply in cities without increasing sprawl and without concentrating power at the top of municipal government. They include several recommendations made by its own Housing Affordability Task Force. For example, ending exclusionary zoning and investing in affordable supply. Ford did not campaign on this promise. A change that continues a dangerous trend to concentrate power in the Prime Minister's office, the Premier's office and now the mayor's office. A diversity of viewpoints is what makes democratic governments representative of the people they serve. Attacking local democracy is not a solution to Ontario's housing crisis,' he says.

The Ontario NDP's municipal affairs critic Jeff Burch issued a statement about the Strong Mayors Building Homes Act in the summer of 2022 when it was first proposed, calling it 'disdain for local democracy' and communication and media relations officer Erica Wallis told Bancroft This Week that this position had not changed.

'Once again, Doug Ford is demonstrating his disdain for local democracy by unilaterally interfering with municipal politics during a municipal election with no consultation. Ford's Strong Mayor proposal has nothing to do with housing as Ford himself already admitted. It's about this premier giving mayors the power to bypass councils, override local bylaws and stifle consultation. This bill will make local government less transparent and less accountable while doing nothing at all to address the affordable housing crisis,' he said in his statement.

However, Victoria Podbielski, press secretary for the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing Steve Clark, defended the

legislation, saying that the Ford government had been re-elected with a strong mandate to help more Ontarians find a home that meets their needs and budget, saying they have a plan to build 1.5 million new homes over the next 10 years so that more families can realize the dream of attainable home ownership. ?The Strong Mayors Building Homes Act provides Toronto and Ottawa with the additional tools needed to advance provincial priorities. Right now, we are focused on getting it right in Toronto and Ottawa, where one third of the growth is expected to take place over the next 10 years. Addressing housing supply issues in these communities is critical and we understand that municipal councils play a crucial role in determining housing supply. Additionally, council could override a mayoral veto of bylaws related to provincial priorities with a two thirds majority vote. As for inappropriate or unintended uses of the proposed powers, mayors are subject to legislated accountability and transparency rules. In the future, we will look toward other municipalities that are shovel ready, committed to growth and cutting red tape. In the coming months, we'll have more information on how these tools will be expanded to other communities, so more municipal leaders can help build Ontario,? she says.

At the Limerick council meeting on Sept. 21, Mayor Carl Stefanski noted that support for the Strong Mayors Building Homes Act seemed to be split relatively evenly and that in his opinion it was good for Toronto and Ottawa. Councillor Jan MacKillican agreed, but not for smaller municipalities like Limerick.

?Because we're not very big in the first place, and to have one voice controlling, I don't think that's right. And I think our administration is key to having input and the knowledge, so I would support what that's about, small municipalities not doing that,? she says.

The rest of council agreed with MacKillican on this and they all voted to send along a letter of support endorsing Kingsville's viewpoint that small municipalities should not adopt the Strong Mayors Building Homes Act.