

POLITICS: Province promising to move quickly on amalgamation after next year's municipal election

Drawing the map of the future

BY LISA QUEEN
Staff Writer

York Region's political map will be redrawn within the next five years to accommodate amalgamations, Municipal Affairs Minister Steve Gilchrist told *The Stouffville Tribune* Tuesday.

The prediction comes on the heels of Monday's announcement, in which Gilchrist outlined plans to unite municipalities in Ottawa-Carleton, Sudbury, Hamilton, Wentworth and Haldimand-Norfolk.

■ The Tribune's view, page 6.

Provincially appointed advisers in each of the four regions will have 90 days to make recommendations on what the political landscape should look like.

Gilchrist, who strongly advocated merging Metro's six former municipalities into the new City of Toronto, said he won't force restructuring in the 905 regions of the Greater Toronto Area.

Instead, he's waiting for the Greater Toronto Services Board to complete a report by December 2000, looking at governance issues and delivery of services.

However, the Scarborough MPP said he can't imagine the study recommending the status quo — nine municipalities in York, eight in Durham, three in Peel, four in Halton, four regional governments, the City of Toronto and the GTSB.

He virtually guaranteed a new municipal structure within five years — and likely sooner rather than later.

"That's certainly the outside of any time frame to effect change in

AMALGAMATION

York Region politicians encouraged to draw own lines or province will do it for them

governance," Gilchrist said during a 20-minute phone interview.

"This is not something we can leave on the back burner forever," Gilchrist encouraged towns and cities to come forward with their own mergers, urging politicians to think of the best interests of their taxpayers.

For example, he agreed to steer the amalgamation of York's six northern municipalities through the legislature if local councils agreed to the plan.

Last week, Newmarket Mayor

Tom Taylor discussed uniting his town with Aurora, King Township, Whitchurch-Stouffville, Georgina and East Gwillimbury.

Some mayors, such as King's Margaret Black and Whitchurch-Stouffville's Wayne Emmerson, are adamantly opposed to the plan while Aurora's Tim Jones and Georgina's Rob Grossi are willing to study the concept.

Gilchrist dismissed suggestions any amalgamations in the GTA will have to wait until after the municipal elections in November 2000.

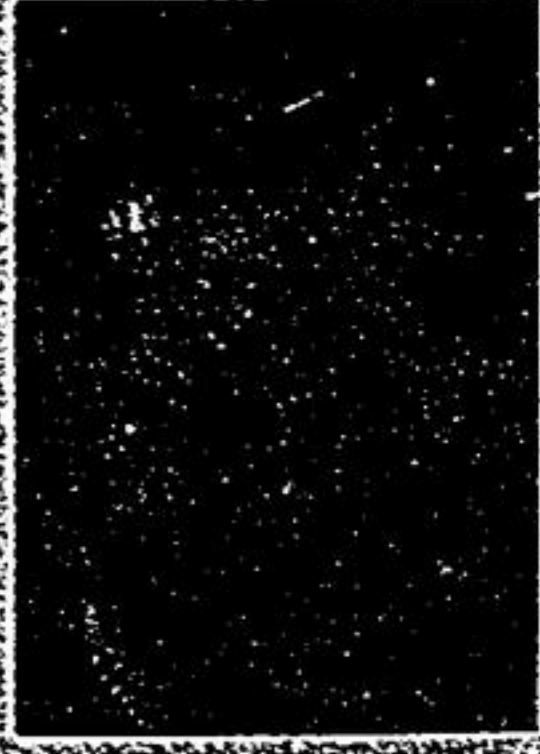
He argued that while the GTSB has another 16 months to complete its report, there is nothing preventing the agency from coming in with recommendations before its deadline.

"I made a commitment to move quickly once that report is received."

Gilchrist said he is moving swiftly on amalgamations in Ottawa-Carleton, Sudbury, Haldimand-Norfolk and Hamilton because the communities

have agreed to municipal restructuring, although there is wide debate about which option is best. He dismissed suggestions he was letting politicians who have refused to study the issue objectively off the hook.

"Every region needs a different consideration."



STEVE GILCHRIST
Encouraging towns to come forward with own mergers

Stickmen used to show how politicians can be cut and millions of dollars saved

Wake-up call for regions and their leaders

BY LISA QUEEN
Staff Writer

At a press conference Monday, Municipal Affairs Minister Steve Gilchrist used stickmen as a prop to demonstrate how dozens of politicians can be cut, and millions of dollars saved, when municipalities in four Ontario regions amalgamate.

Although towns and cities in the GTA aren't being forced to unite yet, York Region mayors warn Gilchrist's chart proves the writing is clearly on the wall.

They fear that unless local councillors come up with their own amalgamation plans, the province will eventually impose its own alternative, which could mean splitting communities.

"It's like a wake-up call to every municipal government across the province," Markham Mayor Don Cousens said yesterday from the Association of Municipalities of Ontario conference in Toronto.

He pointed out that when Gilchrist announced the amalgamations of Ottawa-Carleton, Hamilton, Haldimand-Norfolk and Sudbury, he didn't limit his comments to those four regions.

"The Ontario government is committed to easing the burden on local taxpayers by reducing the

number, size and cost of municipal government across the province," Gilchrist said.

These efforts have already reduced the number of Ontario's municipal governments by 28 per cent to 586 from 815. Restructurings to date will generate an estimated tax savings of more than \$220 million annually.

Gilchrist urged all municipalities to consider restructuring as a way of cutting taxes and providing more efficient local government.

Although he failed to mention the province gave Toronto \$250 million in loans and grants when its six cities merged, he boasted Toronto has saved \$134 million in less than two years.

Studies have pegged Sudbury's potential savings at between \$9 million and \$15 million a year.

Cousens wants to see York councillors negotiate their own solution despite more than two years of bitter and futile debates that were eventually shelved in 1997.

"If we get a consensus from within, he (Gilchrist) will help make it happen. If we don't, it's obvious he's not going to force it right now but the writing is on the wall," he said, adding residents and business leaders should pressure councillors to cut politicians, reduce taxes and streamline services.

"I think this will open up fresh

dialogue. I think it's a fresh chance."

Cousens refused to discuss his preferred option, saying only that the regional level of government should be retained, at least for the foreseeable future, and York's nine municipalities should be reduced.

'Maybe we could try to work with those municipalities that are amenable (to uniting). If that means King and Whitchurch-Stouffville are left out, that's up to them.'

While other York mayors agree Gilchrist's announcement pressures them into resuming discussions of amalgamation, Aurora Mayor Tim Jones doesn't believe the province plans to force York to unite.

"I have my promise by Al Palladini (the Vaughan-King-Aurora MPP) assured Jones during June's provincial election that Queen's Park will leave restructuring to local councils, which I'm going to hold him to."

But Richmond Hill Mayor Bill Bell suggested York politicians who refuse to discuss amalgamating their towns are hiding their heads in the sand.

At the same time, he suspects councillors are incapable of coming to any agreement on the emotional issue.

"I don't think anything will happen until somebody holds a gun to our heads, and they have to cock the trigger, too," he said.

"I think this (latest round of amalgamations) should serve as a wake-up call, but I really think he (Gilchrist) has to take a firm position before anything will happen voluntarily."

Bell favours turning York into one city, although he's open to other suggestions, such as one city in the south and another in the north.

Newmarket Mayor Tom Taylor has been pushing a northern city, made up of Newmarket, Aurora, Georgina, East Gwillimbury, King Township and Whitchurch-Stouffville, as a way of protecting rural areas, saving money, and improving services.

He urged councillors to hash out a plan for York's municipalities, adding he's disappointed Gilchrist didn't give GTA politicians a deadline to recommend restructuring changes.

"Maybe we could try to work with those municipalities that are amenable (to uniting). If that means King and Whitchurch-Stouffville are left out, that's up to them."

King Mayor Margaret Black doesn't believe the province has any plans to pressure York to unite.

'I don't think anything will happen until somebody holds a gun to our heads, and they have to cock the trigger, too.'

"I just don't think that's an issue." She also dismissed suggestions that merging towns would protect rural areas, which would no longer have to fight for new growth and assessment to keep taxes down.

"On the farm, we have an expression about putting the fox in the hen house. And putting Vaughan or Newmarket in charge of King is like putting the fox in the hen house," she said.

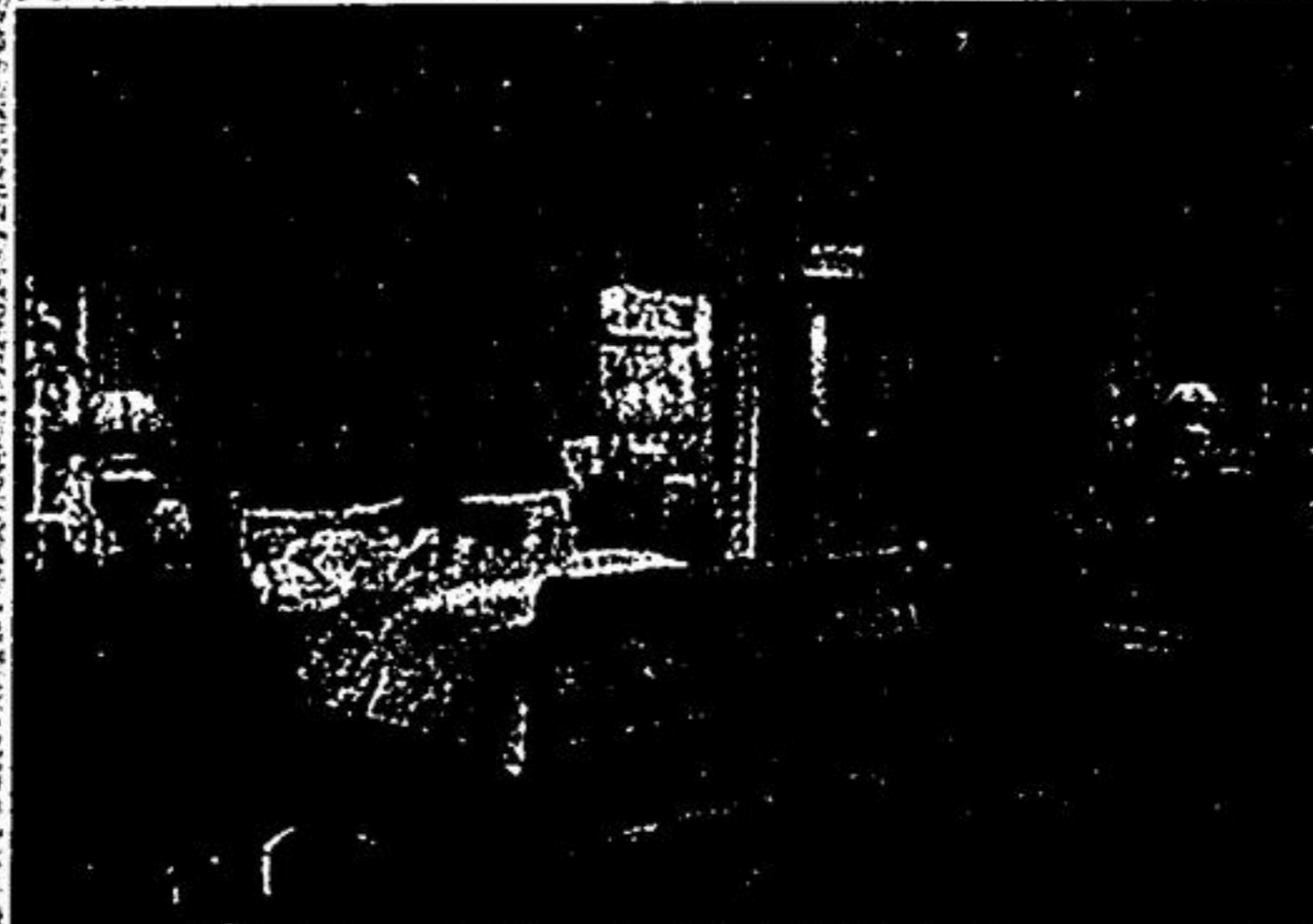
"Look at what these lovely cities have done with the farmland they have. Vaughan is just marching up the 400 highway."

They have taken thousands and thousands of acres of farmland. Newmarket is the same. If they take over, they'll just march right through."

She also said the Greater Toronto Services Board should be killed because it's an ineffective body.

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