

**Remarks by: Lindsay Jones, Executive
Director, AMO**

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**Presentation to Standing Committee on
Heritage, Infrastructure and Cultural
Policy**

Bill 100, *Better Regional Governance Act*

Thank you, Mister Chair, for the opportunity to address the committee today. My name is Lindsay Jones, and I am Executive Director at the Association of Municipalities of Ontario, also known as “AMO”. Joining me virtually is Alicia Neufeld, Associate Director of Policy.

AMO and the 444 municipalities we represent are committed to working with the province to deliver strong, effective local governance. Local democracy is the engine of community life. It is the most direct and accountable way for residents to shape the world they live in. Our neighbourhoods should be guided by the people who call them home.

Strong local governance turns collective vision into reality, fostering a sense of belonging, and ensuring that progress is rooted in local values and priorities. When we champion vibrant municipal democracy, we aren’t just protecting a system, we are empowering the local leadership and diverse voices necessary to build a resilient, self-determined future for every community in Ontario.

Bill 100 cannot be considered in isolation. The changes proposed in this bill come against a background of ongoing provincial action in areas of municipal jurisdiction, that serve to undermine municipal authority and centralize decision making at the province.

We are united in wanting all orders of government to work efficiently and effectively in the best interests of their residents. Some targeted governance changes may help further this goal, but only if they are designed with local voice. A successful path forward relies on the province setting clear objectives, providing the right implementation supports, and conducting the local consultation necessary to make changes successful.

In this context, AMO is advancing four recommendations to help the government meet its goal of strong, effective local governance without undermining local democracy.

1. Keep the selection of regional chairs and county wardens local

The combination of provincially-appointed heads of council with “strong chair” powers is fundamentally undemocratic. It erodes the ability for local residents to hold their elected officials to account and elect people who care about their priorities.

The introduction of Strong Mayor powers has been divisive with strong opinions on both sides. We continue to be concerned that some of these powers undermine the collaborative nature of municipal government that has long been a strength of our system. Allowing heads of Council to make law with the support of just one third of Council runs counter to fundamental democratic principles behind majority rule. Similarly, allowing the head of Council to hire and fire the heads of departments and reorganize municipal administration is at odds with good corporate governance practices.

For the first time, Ontario voters will have the chance this October to choose the Heads of Council they think will best wield those powers. But if this Bill passes, voters will have no say in the provincially-appointed Strong Chairs making critical decisions on their behalf. That is a fundamental difference between the strong mayor powers granted to elected mayors and those proposed for appointed regional chairs.

On how regional chairs are selected, we have significant concerns with the provincial government's preference to centralize that authority. AMO prefers municipal leaders to be elected by their communities. Unlike provincial appointments, this keeps heads of council directly accountable to local voters.

However, if the province moves forward with appointed heads of council, we ask that regional councils instead be empowered to appoint a chair from among their own elected members. This model is already standard practice across counties. Appointing a regional strong chair in this manner combines the collaborative strengths of peer-selection – where the leader is vetted by fellow mayors – with the authority to drive regional growth. This structure strikes a practical balance. It provides the tools for decisive regional action while maintaining direct accountability to local constituents. Locally selected chairs and wardens are best positioned to work effectively with their local colleagues and advance shared community priorities.

If the province is intent on provincial appointments of municipal heads of council, which AMO strongly opposes, there must be minimum requirements for those

individuals enshrined in the statute. First, a requirement to reside within the municipality. And second, a requirement to have previously served that community as an elected official.

2. Empower municipalities to determine their own composition

The number of councillors at the table impacts the effectiveness of a council and the ability to represent residents. Too many members of council can slow decision-making; and too few dilutes the voices of residents. We agree that it is good practice for municipalities to regularly review council composition and listen to residents to determine if there is a need to change the number of elected officials.

At the same time, at a ratio of almost 4,000 residents per councillor¹, Ontario's municipal elected officials represent more residents than councillors in every other province except for British Columbia – this is triple the national average for council representations. Arbitrarily reducing the number of council members without local input or consent only serves to increase this ratio, undermining the important work councils are already doing to deliver efficient, effective decision making.

For these reasons, we support the proposed requirement for regional councils to review council composition following an election. This keeps decisions about governance and representation local, allowing communities to determine the right number of elected officials to meet the expectation of residents.

¹ 3,955 according to research from the University of Calgary on Municipal Electoral Institutions in Canada

3. Leave weighted voting to local communities that best understand local needs

Bill 100 would provide the Minister with regulatory-making authority to unilaterally determine weighted voting in the regions and county prescribed. AMO believes that local councils are best positioned to determine how and when to use weighted voting. At the same time, because needs and priorities vary across lower-tier municipalities, regions and counties understand that weighted voting requires careful application to avoid creating unfair advantages or disadvantages between neighbouring communities. Many upper-tier councils already use some form of weighted voting to balance these interests.

If the province chooses to move forward with a mandatory weighted voting framework, it is critical that open and transparent engagement occur with each community beforehand to ensure community understanding and buy-in. This is essential for the ongoing integrity of our local democracy.

4. Pass the legislation reforming municipal Codes of Conduct

Finally, AMO continues to call for the passage of measures included in Bill 9 which was introduced almost a year ago following years of advocacy from municipalities calling for code of conduct legislation.

Maintaining ethical behaviour and respectful discourse are at the heart of public trust, and the ability of councils to make effective, collaborative decisions for residents. All Ontarians also expect to work in a safe and respectful environment, including

members of council when they agree to take office. The current tools available to municipal councils to ensure ethical behaviour are inadequate and do not meet public expectations. Yet, despite continued provincial intervention into municipal governance, the province has still not passed this important legislation.

Code of conduct legislation is especially important in context with the decision to appoint heads of council. As Premier Ford and successive Ministers of Municipal Affairs and Housing have said, elections are the mechanism for voters to remove members of council from office if they have lost public trust as a result misconduct. If Bill 9 is not passed and regional heads of council become provincial appointments, hundreds of thousands of Ontarians will have no ability to hold their regional chairs accountable for misconduct.

We are encouraged that Minister Flack has committed to passing that important legislation before this October's municipal elections.

Conclusion

In closing, while AMO supports the intended outcomes of this legislation – effective, meaningful decision making by municipal governments, we remain concerned that it is the next in a series of decisions that continues to remove authority from local officials in favour of concentrating decision making at Queen's Park.

Local democracy is at the centre of our communities and municipalities are the level of government closest to the people. Changes that centralize decision making and

disconnect the line of accountability from voters directly to elected officials undermine the democratic principles that Ontarians expect. Furthermore, they undermine the ability of councils to represent the interests of their residents and deliver effective services.

Neighbourhoods belong to the people who call them home, not to the province. Appointing leaders with Strong Chair powers is fundamentally undemocratic – residents cannot fire someone they didn't elect.

We urge the government to work with us, not in place of us as it explores governance changes. Collaboration is key to achieving provincial goals. AMO appreciates having the opportunity to speak today, and to continuing to work with the government to evolve local governance.

Thank you.