

Attention: Wilmot Clerk, Mayor Salonen, Member of Council: ['Crazy idea': Ontario councillors push back as strong mayor powers reach small towns](#) Waterloo Region Record, dated June 1, 2025, titled "Crazy idea: Ontario councillors push back as strong may powers reach small towns:

'Crazy idea': Ontario councillors push back as strong mayor powers reach small towns

Ontario towns move to reject strong mayor powers

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Ontario Municipal Affairs and Housing Minister Rob Flack attends Question Period at Queen's Park in Toronto, Tuesday, May 13, 2025. THE CANADIAN PRESS/Cole Burston

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By Cassidy McMackon The Canadian Press

TORONTO - A month after Ontario's government extended strong mayor powers to a swath of new municipalities, some leaders are promising never to use the measures — but a chorus of small-town councillors warn that local democracy is under threat.

As of May 1, another 169 mayors in the province can now veto bylaws, pass new ones with just one-third of council in favour and hire or fire municipal department heads unilaterally.

Municipal Affairs and Housing Minister Rob Flack said last month that the province decided to more than triple the number of mayors who can access the powers in an effort to build housing faster and streamline local governance.

The measures were first introduced in 2022 and initially only applied to the mayors of Toronto and Ottawa, Ontario's two most populous cities.

Several municipalities are taking active steps to reject the powers now that they have been granted more widely.

Mark Hunter, one of 10 city councillors in Stratford, recently got unanimous support for his motion to reject the new powers. Hunter said it was symbolic and designed to show that municipal democracy shouldn't be "subject to provincial whim."

"What it effectively does is get rid of majority rule in our council," he said.

"It's the expectation of the residents in our community that their representatives are able to fully represent them and this change puts some level of diminishment on that."

Hunter said his fellow councillors can have strong disagreements at council, but lively discussions result in better decisions for the community. Anything that diminishes that discussion is worse for residents, he said.

Stratford Councillors unanimous in rejecting strong mayor powers, citing majority rule concerns.

Councillors aren't concerned about Stratford's current mayor abusing his power, said Hunter, but they are worried about what could happen in the future.

"It's another example of concentrating power in fewer hands. Unfortunately in human history, that doesn't always work out so well," he said.

David O'Neil, a councillor in Quinte West, said he is also concerned about strong mayor powers, adding they represent "a real misdirection" by the province.

"I think this decision is on par with the crazy idea of building a tunnel under the 401," O'Neil said, referring to Premier Doug Ford's promise to add a tunnel under the major Ontario highway.

He added he is skeptical that strong mayor powers would lead to new housing being built in his community, and thinks the province should waive development fees if it wants to see more housing built.

Zack Card, another councillor for Quinte West, said he believes the expansion of the strong mayor powers will "erode the democratic traditions of municipal councils in Ontario."

Quinte West Councillor O'Neil suggests the introduction of strong mayor powers represents a "misdirection" by the Ford Government, while Quinte West Councillor Card suggests strong mayor powers "erode the democratic traditions of municipal councils in Ontario."

I share in these councillors concerns and suggest Wilmot council consider a similar resolution to that of Stratford council. I was alarmed with Mayor Salonen's direction that council keep its opinions to themselves on strong mayor powers in the May 26th council meeting because the powers had already been bestowed upon the mayor.

Our Ward councillors are duly elected officials who represent the voice of the people. By silencing council, Mayor Salonen effectively silenced the residents of Wilmot on this critical issue of rural democratic values.

“I believe effective councils work collaboratively and with an understanding that all voices carry equal weight. Tipping that balance could potentially hinder governance and make solving issues within our communities more difficult,” Card wrote in an email.

Neither O’Neil nor Card would speak to the recent dismissal of the municipality’s chief administration officer, which was described on the municipality’s website as a “mayoral decision” pursuant to the legislation, made on the first day the powers were available.

Quinte West Mayor Jim Harrison said in an email to The Canadian Press that “the decision was made in close collaboration and consensus with council, utilizing strong mayor powers to move forward.”

Less than a week after the decision, he told a council meeting that he wasn’t planning to make use of the strong mayor powers.

O’Neil suggested his concern is more future-oriented: it’s unclear what could a different sort of mayor do with these powers five, 10 or 20 years down the road.

David Arbuckle, executive director of the Association of Municipal Managers, Clerks and Treasurers of Ontario, said unilateral power threatens a local government’s administrative authority and staffers’ ability to give non-partisan, evidence-based advice.

The Executive Director of the Association of Municipal Managers, Clerks and Treasurers of Ontario, David Arbuckle, suggests “smaller communities might struggle to have that (media) accountability and people being aware of what’s happening.” I, too, have concerns with oversight of strong mayor powers, as previously described in my letter to council dated 2025.05.21.

- Erosion of Democratic Checks and Balances
- Risk of Corruption and Cronyism
- Marginalization of Council Voices
- Environmental and Planning Concerns

“We’ve seen an erosion and a decline of the local presses across Canada, and it’s no more visible than in small communities,” he said.

“If you’re concentrating powers, what’s really needed is external oversight bodies. And the media is one of those, so smaller communities might struggle to have that accountability and people being aware of what’s happening.”

Siemiatycki said while he sympathizes with the province’s desire to tackle a housing and infrastructure crisis, he agrees with the councillors who have raised concerns.

“It doesn’t necessarily mean you’ll go further just because you’re aiming to go faster,” he said.

“The thing that’s more sustainable over the long term is acceleration through processes that have very clear accountabilities and timelines to them.”

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Municipal governance requires proper check and balances, transparent processes, and inclusive decision making. I believe strong mayor power threatens these principals, particularly in smaller communities like Wilmot.

I would welcome hearing publicly in open council chambers each councillor’s position on strong mayor powers in Wilmot, and to consider passing a motion like that of Stratford council.

Thanks,

Rory Farnan

Wilmot Township Resident