



Municipality of the District of Argyle

Item: Strong Mayor Powers

Date: September 5, 2025

Vision statement

Argyle is the community of choice to invest, live and play.

Mission statement

Argyle invests time & talent in growth opportunities in fishing, tourism, and renewable energy sectors.

Argyle provides affordable taxation while providing safe and healthy communities and strives to engage and inform our residents on decisions that affect them most.

Argyle provides high class, accessible recreational and cultural facilities and helps celebrate its unique heritage and culture and welcomes new residents to our region.

Background:

Strong Mayor powers has been an issue in the media and in conversations amongst the administrators of the municipality. The NSFM has not yet taken a position on this issue, but the AMANS certainly has and is attached.

The AMANS position is a position that reflects the conversations I have been privy to with fellow colleagues. The purpose of this document is to bring into conversation the elected officials' perspective on the issue. There will be no recommendations or motions from your CAO. I view this as a political conversation.

The strong mayor conversation is an ongoing one. We are truly unsure of the legislative conversations surrounding this issue as we are not privy to them. Ontario established strong mayor powers, and if we are to guess, that equates to providing special powers to a mayor, which in that case includes veto powers on certain decisions, and administrative powers including the sole ability to terminate a CAO and establish budgets for the organization; at least this is what we know of the Ontario decisions. The discussion seems to have been initiated by the mayor of HRM, but outside of that it is less clear. There is no known provincial issue on this currently.

Discussion points

From an elected official perspective there are a couple of obvious items. First, we don't have a mayor. If this is a provincial initiative, it likely would start with the movement away from a Warden in favor of a mayor. Currently that decision is municipal, but once a mayor system is decided, there is no reversal to a warden system.

The difference may be obvious to councillors, but for the public it means that a mayor is elected at large, as opposed to the warden who is elected in their district, and selected amongst their peers. While the existing powers are essentially identical, the method of their choice is considerably different. A warden must win two types of elections, one in their district and one as the chosen amongst peers. The mayor is selected by the entire community once and is the chair and lead of council. Again, their powers under the MGA are not dissimilar to a warden, except the election at large gives them a bigger picture view of the municipality (as opposed to a single district or region).

Most certainly, all mayors elected last year were not elected with the understanding they may have special powers. The electorate may have chosen that person, but not under the understanding they will possess unique powers over other elected officials. Should the province seek to initiate strong mayor powers before the next election, they are in effect overriding the nature of why a mayor was elected.

Strong Mayor powers, depending on how strong they are, weaken the voice of other councillors that were also duly elected by residents. It diminishes their role in a forum where the majority of councils make the decisions.

Strong mayor powers may increase the efficiency of decisions made at the council level. Long debates amongst all council members may delay the advances needed in municipal services, and risk running contrary to provincial initiatives, or local interests. We have seen evidence of strain between the province and major municipalities where there are considerable gaps in how they view issues. Argyle has not experienced this friction to a significant amount as of yet.

The potential gained efficiency is offset by the reduction of democratic debate. The mayor is not the only councillor that is elected at large – it is simply a larger demographic that elected the mayor. This risks reducing the efficacy of other councillors, and would logically lead to the next question: Why do we have other councillors? I encourage discussion here.

Every 8 years, municipalities are mandated to re-assess their electoral boundaries and number of councillors, so there is a pre-established process that examines that question, and, from my vantage point, should not be conflated with strong mayoral powers. These issues are separate.

The power to add, delete and modify municipal councillors rests with the municipal governments at this time, not through provincial legislation. My experience with boundary review is that there are some that would like to reduce councillors around our table. Statistically the average is around 7 councillors and we are at 9. While there are some that wish to reduce, when presenting options to do so, many communities wish not to lose representation. Furthermore, I would note that the participation rate in municipal elections in Argyle are extraordinarily high, ranging from 65% to 79%. This compares to the forties in many neighbouring areas. The statistical electoral response does not compel significant changes.

We are not in control of the decision for strong mayor powers. Other questions and concerns include: What powers are subject to Mayorial decision? How far does the power extend? Outside of the administrative side of things, what decisions are appropriate, if any, that reside solely in the power of one person? There is truth in the statement that the CAO exercises influence in the decisions of council. However, decisions are made by the majority of Council. The CAO position is not political, it is meant to be a consistent voice and counsel to elected officials. The position serves at the pleasure of its Council. Performance issues are addressed by Council. How does that decision making change, if held by one elected official? From my vantage point, the power change is like a provincial department setup, except there are other elected officials that don't share the same power and control of a strong mayor.

Experience would dictate the expectation that the NSFM would take a position on this major issue for elected officials. I am void of that information despite requests. The NSFM is an advocacy group for our councils, and this response is slow and discouraging. Administrators are concerned that there are conversations happening on this issue without consultation. The NSFM did put out a survey on this issue months ago, and my understanding was that they were reviewing this on the 5th of September. As of 10 pm Friday, no response was received.

Council is being asked to review the information provided, and if willing, provide a position on the issue to aid the NSFM and the province in their considerations. Since the fall legislature is coming, the concern is that our voices on this issue are needed now.

MGA considerations:

None noted

Financial considerations:

None noted at this time