

WHO WILL BE DURHAM’S NEXT REGIONAL CHAIR?

DURHAM REGION — One of the biggest political questions hanging over Durham Region will not be answered at the ballot box on October 26. It will be answered at Queen’s Park. For the first time in more than a decade, Durham residents will not directly elect their Regional Chair. Ontario’s Better Regional Governance Act, 2026 changed the process, giving the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing the authority to appoint the person who will lead Durham Regional Council.

The provincial application period has already closed, but Queen’s Park has not publicly released the names of the applicants or a shortlist. According to reports Durham MPP and Ontario Environment Minister Todd McCarthy’s office says the appointment is expected to be announced “on or around November 1” — only days after Durham’s October 26 municipal election. McCarthy’s office would not disclose who is being considered. That timing has created an intriguing political guessing game across Durham. Who will Premier Doug Ford’s government choose to occupy arguably the most powerful municipal position in the region?

One name increasingly difficult to ignore is Pickering Mayor Kevin Ashe. WHY ASHE? Ashe brings something Queen’s Park may find attractive: extensive municipal experience combined with a long history of political familiarity with Ontario’s Progressive Conservatives. He has served as a school board trustee, Pickering councillor, Durham regional councillor and, since 2022, Mayor of Pickering. His Progressive Conservative connections are also not speculative history. Ashe won the Ontario PC nomination for Ajax-Pickering in 2007 and ran provincially under the Progressive Conservative banner. More recently, Ashe publicly endorsed Doug Ford during the 2025 provincial election campaign, praising Ford’s leadership and affordability measures. That combination of municipal experience and political compatibility could make Ashe an attractive candidate for a provincial government that has explicitly said its new regional governance model is intended to improve alignment between regional and provincial priorities, particularly housing and infrastructure. There is one major complication. Kevin Ashe is running for re-election as Mayor of Pickering on October 26. The city’s official certified candidate list confirms he is seeking another mayoral term. That raises an obvious question. Why run for mayor if you expect to become Regional Chair days later? There are several possible answers. He may simply intend to remain Mayor of Pickering and have no interest in the regional appointment. He may have applied but have no assurance whatsoever that he will be selected. Or Queen’s Park may deliberately be waiting until after October 26 before making its final decision so that it knows exactly who will make up the next regional council before choosing the person who will lead it. At this point, anything beyond those facts is speculation.

WHAT ABOUT JOHN HENRY? The other obvious possibility is the man already doing the job. John Henry was elected Regional Chair in 2018 and re-elected in 2022. He has years of experience managing Durham’s complicated regional responsibilities, including policing, transit, water, infrastructure, housing and social services. If Queen’s Park wanted continuity, Henry would appear to have a powerful argument. But there is an important clue suggesting the province may be preparing to move in another direction. When the governance changes were announced in April, Henry publicly said his role as the elected Regional Chair was “coming to an end” and that he looked forward to serving Durham “in a different capacity.” That certainly does not prove Henry will not be appointed. But it hardly sounds like the public statement of someone expecting another four years in the Regional Chair’s office.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION: EXPERIENCE OR ALIGNMENT? That may ultimately be the real choice facing Queen’s Park. Does the province select someone primarily for continuity and extensive knowledge of Durham Regional government? Or does it choose a municipal leader who shares more of the Ford government’s political and policy direction? The province has made clear why it changed the system. Queen’s Park says appointed regional chairs, armed with additional powers, can speed up decisions and better coordinate priorities such as housing and infrastructure. That means the next Chair will be far more than a ceremonial figure. The Regional Chair presides over Durham Regional Council, provides political leadership and serves as the Region’s Chief Executive Officer. For Durham’s eight municipalities, the decision could shape the Region’s direction for the next four years.

OUR EARLY PREDICTION - If we were handicapping the race today, Kevin Ashe would have to be considered one of the strongest possibilities. His résumé fits. His regional experience fits. His lengthy municipal career fits. And his historical relationship with the Progressive Conservative movement gives him something few municipal politicians in Durham can match: familiarity with both sides of the municipal-provincial political table. But there is no public evidence that Ashe has been selected, that he is on a shortlist, or even that he submitted an application. Those are important distinctions.

John Henry cannot be counted out either, and the confidential application process means Queen’s Park could ultimately surprise everyone with another experienced municipal, political or community leader. What we do know is that Durham residents will vote on October 26 without voting for the person who will lead Durham Regional Council. Then, potentially within days, Queen’s Park will make the decision for them. That may make the first week of November every bit as politically interesting as election night itself.

THE CENTRAL PREDICTION: FRONTRUNNER TO WATCH — Kevin Ashe CONTINUITY CHOICE — John Henry WILD CARD — A candidate whose name has not yet entered public speculation Until Queen’s Park opens the envelope, Durham politics will be left with one very big question: Who will be sitting in the Regional Chair’s seat when the new council takes office?

COMMITMENT 01 OF 15

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VOTE OCT 26

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