



Ecology Action Centre

Keeping the “Know” in Nova Scotia:

The facts About “Strong
Mayor” Legislation

July 2025

Maintaining Democracy in Nova Scotia

The Nova Scotia government is considering passing “strong mayor” legislation, giving the mayor of Halifax Regional Municipality (HRM) extraordinary powers over council. A more accurate term would be Puppet Mayor, as such mayors are vulnerable to the influence of the provincial political majority, and impervious to the will of the people they are elected to govern. “Strong mayor” systems do not only give the mayor more powers; they also give the Province more control over the municipality.

What is a “Strong Mayor”?

The specific nature of “strong mayor” powers would be determined by the provincial government but can include the ability to veto the majority votes of democratically elected councils. “Strong mayor” systems tend to give a mayor the power to single-handedly overrule bylaws, pass a budget, hire and fire the Chief Administrative Officer and other senior staff, restructure municipal staff and departments or make large-scale planning and development decisions (CBC Information Morning, 2025).

Such systems are more typically found in cities in the United States, where the prevalence rate of the mayor-council model has declined from 56 per cent of municipalities in 1994 to 44 per cent by 2010 (Mullaly, M., Municipal World, 2025). Recently, Ontario's Ford government passed legislation granting “strong mayor” status to more than 200 municipalities of all sizes.

Red Herrings and Reality

A “strong mayor” system is the latest of many moves by the Houston government, since being re-elected in November, to centralize power with the Province. During the first legislative sitting of this government, it passed omnibus bills to reduce public input on proposed new laws, unilaterally lifted the decades-old uranium ban and fracking moratorium, eliminated important government reporting on emergency room closures, eliminated Communications N.S., held reporters further afield from government staff and elected officials and empowered itself to fire non-union civil service members and override municipal decisions on transportation and infrastructure.

Several red herrings have been offered as rationale for these decisions. The desperate need for more housing is one. The responsibility for affordable housing, where the need is greatest, lies with the province. Councillors and mayors with experience with “strong mayors” in Ontario say they have seen no uptick in the rate of new housing developments under the new system (Taplin, J. Chronicle Herald, 2025; CBC Information Morning, 2025). In fact, under “strong mayor” systems, sprawl has worsened in Ontario, and they are building fewer new homes than any other province. In Aurora, Ontario, these powers were used to stop a shelter for 68 unhoused residents (Pothen, P. Environmental Defence, 2025).

The real solution to the housing crisis is to invest in new housing,

Red Herrings and Reality (continued)

especially non-market affordable housing. Rather than wresting away control over development decisions from the governments that are closest to the people, municipalities and nonprofit housing organizations should be given the resources they need to ensure developments proceed where they are most needed.

Another red herring is traffic. In July, the HRM gave final approval to a plan to make a particular street one-way for vehicles and add active transportation infrastructure. In response, Premier Houston threatened to invoke the government's own Bill 24, which empowered his public works minister to override municipal transportation decisions. The premier cites safety concerns, but the council's decision to approve the plan followed years of thorough analysis of the street's traffic and consultation with the public and industry (HRM, 2024). Councillors and the public have expressed concern that the premier's threats have more to do with paving the road for a "strong mayor" than they do with a small side street in Halifax (Ryan, H. CBC News, 2025).

When Ontario's Ford government first proposed "strong mayor" legislation, Phil Pothen of Environmental Defence wrote that the idea "is the latest in a series of new laws and policies that seem calculated to eliminate expert, coordinated, rules-based efficient planning of new homes and workplaces, replacing it with arbitrary and corruption-prone favour-granting" (Pothén, P. Environmental Defence, 2025). And now the same is happening here in Nova Scotia.

The Risks of Absolute Power

Regardless of anyone's opinion on the HRM's current mayor, there are great risks to giving one person the power that comes with a "strong mayor" system. The current mayor and council are new, but as recently as 2012 the office of mayor was tainted after numerous scandals perpetrated by the city's lead elected official (Cooke, A. Global News, 2022). There are no specific qualifications to be mayor, and no limits on the number of terms a person can hold the position. Furthermore, there are few checks and balances that could accompany these new powers.

Those with direct experience in Ontario report that under this system, senior municipal staff have been fired without cause, only to be replaced by friends of the mayor. Administrators live in fear for their jobs and often demand more money to take a job so fraught with risk (CBC Information Morning, 2025).

Such systems call into question the rationale for even having councillors, given they can no longer make decisions in a democratic way. In short, a "strong mayor" system simply lacks the proper democratic process of a municipal council, with a member representing each district of the municipality, engaging in vigorous weekly debate over current issues and policy ideas and hashing out each decision.

Decentralize Power

The current Government of Nova Scotia continues to consolidate its power and force its pro-industry agenda on Nova Scotians. The premier and his municipal affairs minister claim that the mayor represents voters across the municipality (CBC Information Morning, 2025). Those who have experienced these systems say it makes government more vulnerable to corruption, because with one person making all decisions, only one person needs to be corrupted to sway decisions against citizens and in favour of the wealthiest.

The Ecology Action Centre (EAC) recommends against “strong mayor” legislation. Such a system would only centralize power, taking the political process further from citizens and exposing municipalities to greater risk of corruption or a puppet mayor working on behalf of the provincial government. The true strength of an effective mayor is not veto power but rather the ability to build consensus, keeping councillors focused on ways of serving constituents – their own and those of their fellow councillors.

We further recommend rescinding Bill 24. Municipalities – the most local of governments – understand the challenges in the neighbourhoods that make up their towns and cities better than Province House ever could. They work with expert staff to make informed transportation and planning decisions. By virtue of being elected they have earned the right to do this work without fear of reprisal and overrule from the provincial government.

Decentralize Power (continued)

Instead of wresting power from local governments, the Province should invest in municipalities and trust the democratic process. They should engage the public and communities, and work to encourage continued public engagement in decision-making processes. In short, they need to listen to Nova Scotians. This level of political engagement is essential to preserving democratic values and protecting the well-being of the people.

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