

## ?Assisting unhoused people is not a waste of time,? say advocates for men?s build

Residents in favour of seeing progress on a previously-proposed men's transitional and emergency housing build in Aurora's south end continued their advocacy in Council Chambers last week as lawmakers considered a motion that would have re-started talks on the residence that was voted down by Council last winter.

And some residents took issue with a statement shared by Mayor Tom Mrakas the previous week that a motion brought forward by Ward 5 Councillor John Gallo to invite the Region to apply to the Town once again for the relevant zoning bylaw amendments was ?a waste of time.?

Resident Kimberley McLean was first to speak in favour of the motion moving forward, stating that what was on the table was ?both helpful and productive? in addressing community needs.

?Over the past several years, Regional Emergency and Transitional Housing needs have been primarily addressed by Newmarket, followed by East Gwillimbury and Richmond Hill. Aurora has put forward nothing. In spite of its commitment to do so. We expected and deserved a result. The last emergency housing approved by Aurora was Yellow Brick House in 1978 ? 47 years ago,? she said. ?For some of us, 1978 feels not too long ago, but it's two generations ago. Aurora has not done its share. These posts also indicated that it is a waste of time for Councillors and residents in the Region to open this discussion. Assisting unhoused people is not a waste of time.

?Enough time has already been wasted scuttling this amazing opportunity. I am shocked our Councillors and other leaders would be called out on social media, saying these are empty political gestures for someone to pat themselves on the back while accomplishing nothing. I have heard this a few times and it feels very disrespectful to our Councillors. The location in Aurora is the best location at this time for one of the three needed facilities in this Region. Looking for locations across the Region should include Aurora, not just anywhere but Aurora. We, as a compassionate society, charged with taking care of each other can't wait any longer.

?There are many projects in the Town I believe to be excellent but were always missing the beginning of the continuum for housing. It is part of our own Town's plan. How much longer will we have to wait when there's a very viable option available? As an advocate for unhoused and vulnerable people, I can't simply move on.?

Also objecting to the statement was resident Len Bulmer, who said he voted for ?collegiality? not division in the Town's leadership.

?I did not vote for somebody to attack a colleague in media before this meeting. I didn't vote for that. Why would I vote for that? It doesn't matter which side of the issue I am on, although I am on one side, but I expect the people I vote for, the leader I vote for, to be respectful. I expect them to treat their colleagues with dignity. Didn't see that happen. Part of what's happening here is through leadership action, inaction, or bad action, what we are seeing is this issue is being removed somewhat from what it actually really is. We need that men's transitional shelter.?

He also questioned why Councillor Gallo's reconsideration was an issue while Mayor Mrakas had previously supported the plan, adding: ?I have been in this community a long time and I think this community can have cultural centres and transitional housing projects because I think leadership that doesn't encompass the whole spectrum of the community is leadership that is only half the job done and I want leadership that gets all the job done.?

Many of the residents filling Council Chambers last week, and appearing at the podium, were affiliated with the citizen-led group Aurora Cares ? Housing for All, which has been a continual advocate for the facility at the Yonge Street site originally proposed.

Organization founder Adam Mobbs was amongst the delegates and said the issue of homelessness is not one that can be ignored.

?We see them struggling around us. We see them keep walking and we tell our kids to often do the same. We sometimes pretend

they don't exist, but they do. They exist here right here in Aurora. I see them because I choose to see them. People in trouble can rebuild themselves with some help; some real help that sets them up to rejoin their communities with both dignity and pride. This is the intent of the proposal that first came to you in 2021," said Mobbs. "It's why we're here today. Since 2021, a lot has changed and nothing has changed. The numbers of those experiencing homelessness have dramatically increased, yet support is available but largely remain the same."

Noting the \$1.2 million in Regional dollars already spent to advance the project, Mobbs said he hoped Mayor Mrakas would remain "a fierce advocate for local authority" if Council voted in favour of the motion.

These concerns were echoed by Ward 5 resident Steve Fleck, who said when the plan was first scuttled in February 2024, "there was raucous and loud cheering from those opposed to this project like they had just won the Stanley Cup."

"There were no winners that night - not for Aurora, and certainly not for the homeless and unhoused in Aurora and the GTA," said Fleck. "As I walked home" from that pivotal meeting on a cold winter's night at 1 a.m., I actually encountered a homeless man on a bicycle two blocks from Aurora Town Hall. I thought it rather ironic and cruel that in the warm and comfortable confines of this Chamber, his fate and the possibility of finding a warm place to sleep that night, with professional help available to him on site, to help him get his life back in order, had been denied.

"Mayor Mrakas, you yourself have said in the past that this facility is desperately needed and that you want to build housing for all in Aurora. Where is our individual and collective political leadership and will on this issue? Where is the urgency amongst our community, elected officials and civil service if not at 14452 Yonge Street for whatever reasons? then where will this facility be built?"

"Shrugging our shoulders and hoping the problem just disappears and goes away will not help anyone."

Fleck's comments harkened back to comments made earlier in the evening by resident Jordan Drodge who spoke passionately about his personal experiences and why he's in support of the build.

"What I see here tonight is not just a simple decision whether to build yet another building; but of one that would inspire community spirit," he said. "We aren't just deciding whether to approve another 55 units of housing; but rather we are discussing whether or not the men who live in those units are worth helping in their time of need.

"We are also deciding" on the fate of an ever-growing community of caring individuals who believe they can make a difference and have a desire to help these people. Please do the right thing and allow this motion to carry so these kind, compassionate and generous people can do what they do best."

**By Brock Weir**