

## Aurora Cares aims to rally residents, advocate for transitional housing



A group of concerned Aurora residents has come together to call on local lawmakers to take a second look at a plan for a men's transitional housing building in the Town's south end.

Aurora Cares is a new group that aims to come together as a collective voice calling on Council to follow through on previous plans for the building, which would provide 55 emergency and transitional units for men on a Regionally-owned plot of land on Yonge Street, just south of the railway bridge at Industrial Parkway South.

In February, Council voted down the proposal on a 4 ? 3 vote ? with Mayor Tom Mrakas, Ward 4 Councillor Michael Thompson, Ward 5 Councillor John Gallo, and Ward 6 Councillor Harold Kim voting against the plan. Affirmative votes came from Ward 1 Councillor Ron Weese, Ward 2 Councillor Rachel Gilliland, and Ward 3 Councillor Wendy Gaertner.

Those who voted against the plan cited myriad concerns, including planning process and location, but Aurora Cares says they want Council members to re-open their minds based on facts and real experiences, such as those the Belinda's Place Women's Shelter in Newmarket.

All it takes, they say, is one Councillor to change their minds.

?There was disappointment from many people who participate in community services that serve food banks, food insecurity and homelessness services and a bunch of people thought it was a done deal and were kind of excited right up to a few months [before the vote],? says Aurora Cares member Steve Falk. ?The Mayor was expressing his support for it and when that was suddenly and unexpectedly voted down as a zoning change, it was a real shock. It came right out of left field. It felt that we had made big progress and, for Aurora, something to be proud of. After recovering from the shock, people started to regroup and say maybe there is something we can do.?

Among the main forces behind Aurora Cares is resident Adam Mobbs. He got the ball rolling on social media and momentum has only built from there.

Since the initial foundations were laid, they have sought out expert advice on many fronts, and developed their mandate.

The decision to deny the application at the Committee level on a zoning matter, they contend, ?leaves an opportunity? for Council to

revisit the matter.

‘One option would be a procedural avenue where a Councillor would bring it to Council and say there is an opportunity to revisit this question again. Another option that became apparent was an MZO – the Minister’s Zoning Order – and that can be requested by a party like Aurora Cares or by a Councillor and the Mayor,’ Falk says. ‘One of the avenues would be to try and have one of these orders put in place so that it could be reviewed by the Province [and] it probably would be a good idea to have a ready-to-go group of supporters.’

Their goal over the next few weeks is to bring even more voices into the fold, people who would be willing to come to Council to advocate on behalf of the transitional and emergency housing building, or even write to Council members with their support.

‘It’s a little bit of grassroots awareness-raising,’ says Falk. ‘The very sudden change in direction was a big surprise and a disappointment and they are hoping they can turn it around.’

‘If you just take Council, we were one Councillor’s vote away from support. If you wanted to be simplistic about it, these efforts are to try and persuade one Councillor to think differently about this and to appreciate the amount of historical legacy that Town residents and community residents have had in serving this population and looking forward to solutions. Our goal is to bring to a Council member who may change, or maybe several of them might change the direction of this, that there may have been questions about this location but there was a large historical legacy of people who have been working and thinking about this for maybe as much as 20 years.’

Facilities such as what was proposed for south Aurora are places ‘where someone can step out of the cycle’ of homelessness and models like Belinda’s Place have proved successful.

Following Council’s vote in the winter, a bid to start the process of finding other ‘suitable’ locations for the men’s transitional and emergency housing building within Aurora was successful – but the results of this survey are yet to be reported to Council.

Another motion to look at repurposing Regionally-owned properties, one proposed to Regional Council by Mayor Mrakas, also resulted in a yet-to-be-presented report.

Regardless of the outcome of either or both of these reports, Falk says that the ‘major concerns around a men’s shelter’ will be ‘consistent for community members.’

‘It doesn’t matter where it is. This has been a problem anywhere in the world where people have been trying to put this kind of facility in place,’ he says. ‘It feels like that’s just delaying things. Pick another location and then all the same questions and concerns, but if you’re honest about your desire to provide solutions to people, you will take a look at that location [and the \$1 million that went into planning]. I think this is a key part of our reason for focusing on this location is the amount of investment – just throwing it away [for] something that may or may not be marginally a better solution.’

‘This particular location was not without considerable planning and investment and time is of the essence. It just takes years to do this kind of work. It may be fine for Councillors and the Mayors to say, ‘Let’s go and do a review’ and meanwhile people continue to sleep in tents around the very area where the men’s shelter was going to be placed and in the surrounding forests. Maybe it is not seen that way by Council and the Mayor as a delaying tactic but it delays the inevitable, which is a location has got to be chosen and plenty of time was spent on this one.’

For more information on Aurora Cares, email [infoauroracares@gmail.com](mailto:infoauroracares@gmail.com), check out their Facebook group, or look for their booth at the Aurora Farmers’ Market this Saturday, June 9, from 8 a.m. to 1 p.m. at Town Park, and again on Saturday, June 23 at the same time.

**By Brock Weir**