

Community members speak out in favour of men's transitional, emergency housing

Residents opposed to building a new men's emergency and transitional housing building in Aurora's south end may have won the day, but a smaller crowd of equally passionate proponents of the residence also made their case to Aurora lawmakers on February 13.

While the pro side had Newmarket Mayor John Taylor, Chair of Housing York, and Michael Braithwaite of Blue Door Shelters, on their side, residents at large stressed the importance of community and its responsibility towards the unhoused.

Here is a cross-section of their arguments.

Kimberley came to the podium having recently retired with more than 20 years' experience working with vulnerable populations on behalf of the Salvation Army.

While she said she agreed with opponents that the location of Yonge Street and Industrial Parkway South was less than ideal, she said the need for a shelter wasn't ideal, either.

"This has to be done," she said. "We have to house people. It's appalling in our community we have people living in cars, people living in tents. I have absolute confidence that the technical people for this will use their expertise to take care of things like sightlines and all those things I have no knowledge of."

"Absolutely a lot of your points are very, very valid, but I think we have experts that can deal with that. I believe this zoning absolutely must be done. I think this is a community that needs to incorporate helping our fellow citizens. How can we not? How can we not help those who don't have anywhere to live? This is a temporary location for people. They will be in, they will receive their services, they'll maybe be there a bit longer than some and integrate [into the community]."

"This isn't about Aurora, it's about community members in our Region. I don't know what else to say, I just? this has to happen. We can't wait any longer. People are dying in their cars, people are dying in their tents."

Similarly, resident Denis said he "wanted to believe that Aurora is contributing to solving the issue of?meeting the growing need to house people in a safe and respectful manner."

"I feel like there is an opportunity cost here if we put the decision to another place or a future time," he said. "Some residents have talked about finding a better option for emergency and transitional housing, but given the opportunity costs to defer the decision to another date, I think in a time of immediate need I am wondering if the appropriate lens is to look at the issue and not ask the question? can a better site be found because 'better' is very subjective. ? and does this site meet the stated needs given all the criteria?"

In speaking out in favour of the plan, Denis said he relied on the expertise of planners to address the concerns and find satisfactory solutions that "produce a net positive for our community."

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"I look to the Town of Aurora's Official Plan and its vision and how it speaks to developing a healthy, strong and complete community and it mentions having a full range of community services and amenities, and a broad mix of housing types. When I read the OP vision, my assumption has always been the statement applies to everyone in the community without any qualifiers. I guess what I am hoping to ask from Council is whatever decision Council does finally make on our behalf, I am wondering if you can take

some time to frame what part of your rationale is?with how the decision either contributes or detracts from our Official Plan? I know that will help me and others in the community kind of understand how the words of our Official Plan will actually translate into action or whether they are just another document that is checking off things in a performative exercise to make us feel good about ourselves and our community.?

Similarly, realtor Wasim also cited the quest for ?better.?

?In a perfect world we don't need shelters. I think we should put Michael Braithwaite out of a job, I really do. Shelters are an embarrassment to our community because what that says is we failed in providing affordable options and housing for all people,? he said, adding Council and delegates were trying to ?play? with men's lives.

?We have a chronic homelessness issue and a mental health issue, we all know that, but we don't want to be part of that solution based on what it is I am hearing right now: yes, we need to find housing for homelessness but just not right here?. Can someone tell me right now in the years you guys have been looking at this file, where is the perfect spot in the Town of Aurora to put this location? I think if a perfect spot was brought to the attention of Council the Region of York could have looked at that. People with expertise with the homeless population have supported this and I think what we need to do is listen to our experts. Each of us can have an opinion and I support those opinions and I respect them, but I think we need to constantly look at the experts in this field.?

Added Aiden, a resident of the Pine Hill neighbourhood: ?If one of the wealthiest neighbourhoods in Aurora can't help address homelessness, who can? It's up to us to champion and come up with solutions and look at these programs, such as the housing shelter, in a positive light.

?I have been hearing a lot of rhetoric such as, ?I am not against homelessness, but I am worried about the crime; I am not against homelessness, I am worried about the property prices; I am not against homelessness"and so on and so on. There is actually no evidence to support these claims. In fact, I had gone to the open house and asked the team at York Region, ?Hey, when it comes to crime, what is the data that you have? When it comes to property values, what's the data you have?' Everything I received back showed there was no negative impact of having a housing shelter developed here.?

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