

Costs of after-hours warming and cooling stations explored by Council

As the community looks forward to the end of a heatwave, local lawmakers are considering the feasibility of being able to open cooling and warming stations in future summer and winter seasons.

The move comes on the heels of a motion put forward this past spring by Ward 5 Councillor John Gallo, calling on municipal staff to explore the feasibility of just such a venue within an existing facility, in consultation with the Region of York, as well as for a report back to Council on associated costs and operational requirements.

The resulting report is before Council this month, but Councillor Gallo contends the staff recommendations considered something more elaborate than what he had in mind.

“Municipal facilities are open for all York Region residents to access air conditioned or heated spaces during operating hours, which may vary by municipal facility,” said staff. “Depending on the facility, access to water fountains, washrooms, computers, telephones and wi-fi may be offered. Currently there are none that operate on a 24-hour basis. Warming and cooling centres do not provide dedicated programming, services or supports for people experiencing homelessness, and are intended to provide respite during extreme weather.

“Consideration needs to be given to what program delivery model the Town of Aurora would use in establishing a 24-hour warming and cooling centre, given there are currently no comparable programs in the Region which blend existing warming and cooling centre functions with emergency and/or seasonal shelter and drop-in functions.”

The report touches upon costs that could be related to providing sleeping arrangements, such as the purchase of cots, food, and in offering medical support.

“Should the Town opt to provide overnight accommodations as part of the 24-hour warming and cooling centre program, it would require additional resources to provide accommodations, including storage, overnight staffing, and security, along with bedding, meals, or other basic needs typically offered at emergency and transitional housing facilities and drop-in programs.”

Offering these services, staff note, could entail overtime costs for staff.

These services, however, are beyond what Councillor Gallo said envisioned when Council approved his motion.

“I can sense when staff is not necessarily in favour of a particular initiative or project, and to me this is one of those exercises,” said Councillor Gallo. “It was supposed to be a feasibility study, and maybe I miscommunicated in terms of the scope of it [but] it was never my intent, and I’ll call it a high-level service.

“What I was looking for was an ability, under extreme circumstances, particularly in the winter, for anyone, a place to stay warm between 11 p.m. and 7 a.m., which is when our facilities are closed – not meal services, not three or four staff, not even cots; an ability for someone who is in the cold to be able to have a warm place in one of our facilities, either the Seniors' Centre, the Dome, or one of our other facilities. That was the intent I was trying to accomplish, not full-service.”

He added he didn't disagree when the report noted that these services fall under the purview of the Region of York, but said more was needed in the face of extreme weather events.

“At 11 p.m. when [municipal facilities] are closed, they have nowhere to go,” Councillor Gallo continued. “I sure certainly am not in favour of spending \$170,000 for this, notwithstanding the importance of it, and let's not forget someone in our community passed away from the cold this past winter in our border. So, if that's not motivation enough to try to do something and not rely on upper tier governments to the extent we can, and to the extent that the taxpayers are okay with doing this type of thing, I'd like to propose a

pilot project for this winter. We pick a facility?and let's see how it goes with very minimal staff, and perhaps we can even get some volunteers to reach out to various service groups.?

Ward 3 Councillor Wendy Gaertner offered a similar viewpoint.

She said she voted for the initial motion with something very specific and simple in mind: a place where people can go if it's cold and, for whatever reason, find themselves without power.

She cited one instance this past winter meeting a senior couple warming up at the Aurora Public Library when their neighbourhood lost power.

?I am hoping we can provide something for anybody in Aurora, if they're cold ? and, in fact, I think the heat kills more people than the cold and we are going to have some very warm summer days with climate change,? she said. ?It's already started and there just should be a place where the people that we are supposed to [take care of] can go.?

Added Ward 1 Councillor Ron Weese: ?I believe we should be helping the most vulnerable and, of course, keep any tragedies from happening in those severe weather events, but I think this is far too much. We have to be conscious of our expenditures, and I think as Councillor Gallo suggested, there's a simpler way to go about this.

?I agree?we should have a pilot process looking at the simpler way to do it and using our existing facilities and resources rather than assigning cots and food and Wi-Fi and a variety of other things.?

Council is expected to green-light a further motion this week calling for a further report by September on a pilot project involving a warming centre within an existing municipal facility for the 2025-2026 winter season.

By Brock Weir