

Council calls for Regional collaboration over potential winter warming sites

Aurora Council is calling for collaboration with the Region to make a local warming centre a reality before the coming winter.

The potential for a new warming centre in the community that would be available to all residents in situations of extreme cold was first floated earlier this year through a motion from Ward 5 Councillor John Gallo.

Sitting at the Committee level last week, Council received a report from Director of Operations Robin McDougall who said while staff have identified program rooms in the Aurora Public Library and Aurora Seniors' Centre as potential locations for such a site, making the station a reality could take considerable work and effort.

These two facility recommendations made by Council align with the basic amenities needed for a warming centre, said McDougall in the report. A warming centre facility needs to include washrooms, water fountain, lighting, heat/hydro, are accessible, and are located along a transportation route. However, they also pose some risks such as unauthorized access to sensitive areas and potential property damage.

Preliminary meetings have taken place between staff and executive for both locations. Initial concerns were raised regarding the security, access, precedent setting. Also, those attending would need to be made aware that as of the morning, regular programming needs to return to spaces to ensure the expectations are clear and that this is a temporary site.

Launching a pilot program such as this, the report continues, would involve a combination of Town staff, third-party operator, and security to support a successful program.

The model initially considered by Council of keeping one municipal facility open overnight when an emergency cold weather event is declared by the Region is not a current practice among the nine York Region municipalities, the report notes, and did not include provisions for food, bedding and counselling support for those who turn up.

Balancing the provision of basic care for individuals in need while minimizing facility operational costs presents a challenge when considering this pilot project, said McDougall. In consultation with the Region, their feedback on a pilot project for a 24-hour warming centre notes it would not meet the general parameters for what a typical warming centre provides. Expanding to a 24-hour service adds additional considerations under the Human Right-based approach, leading it towards a seasonal shelter model.

Operating a 24-hour warming centre introduces new legal, operational, and financial risks that are currently outside the scope of the Town's established services. These risks include, but are not limited to, potential liability under the Occupiers' Liability Act, insurance implications, and health and safety obligations under the Occupational Health and Safety Act. There are also some human rights obligations that need to be considered. As the Town is not experienced in the delivery of such services and does not have a designated facility for this purpose, there is a certain amount of risk and liability that may be difficult to predict and mitigate.

The report notes the Region continues to seek partnerships and opportunities to expand critical programs such as drop-in programs and appropriate overnight accommodation.

The potential for a partnership caught the attention of local Councillors, but there was a degree of frustration around the table that what was initially envisioned as keeping doors open at a Town facility overnight for residents to stay warm had snowballed to such an extent.

I'm hesitating because I'm trying to choose my words accordingly because we had a closed session about this and I don't want to cross over that line. The general intent of my motion was to house anyone who needs it when there's extreme cold weather. That was it, said Councillor Gallo. We went from that to full complement staff and all of the bells and whistles, which was never the intent. We went from that to an even more costly scenario and all kinds of obstacles, and I've been around this Council table many, many

years and I can read between the lines. I'll leave it at that.

?There are not many solutions provided in this report, other than the very costly ones, which I don't support. That being said, I spent a lot of time on this report and I could probably criticize a lot of it and suggest that much of it is inconsistent and all kinds of other things, but I'm not sure that's the best way forward.?

Councillor Gallo put forward a motion for a further report due back in October on all options and collaborations and tie it to ?a time frame and with the hopes of lighting some fires and trying to make everyone understand the severity of this, the need for this, and to put our minds together to figure out how to accomplish this.?

?What I'd like to see come back is a partnership with the Region ? we provide a facility, they fund it through a third party, if needed, they take the responsibilities and all of the issues that were raised and we manage it that way,? he continued. ?It doesn't matter to me whether staff do it or someone else does it, or a third party does it ? it doesn't matter to me. Let's get the best people to manage this.

?We supply a space, they manage it and, quite frankly, fund it as well. They're looking for beds, I suspect, and they have the money.?

By Brock WeirEditorLocal Journalism Initiative Reporter