

Council voted to invite Region back to consider Men's Transitional Housing Build before veto

A Council majority voted in favour of inviting the Region of York back to the table to renew its proposal for a men's emergency and transitional facility on Yonge Street, just south of Industrial Parkway, before the Council decision was vetoed by Mayor Tom Mrakas less than 24 hours later.

At issue was a motion from Ward 5 Councillor John Gallo calling on the Town to invite the Region to re-apply for zoning bylaw amendments that could have brought the facility one step closer to fruition.

Councillor Gallo was one of four Council members who voted to deny the Region's application in February of 2024. His vote came with the caveat that a more suitable location be found within Aurora; but with a lack of progress in finding alternative sites, Councillor Gallo said the urgency need for such a facility in the intervening year outweighed his concerns over the proposed location.

'For those of you who believe my actions are politically-motivated and have written so, I think you should all give your heads a shake because a year ago I upset half of you and tonight I am upsetting the other half,' said Gallo, addressing a Council Chamber filled with residents who spoke both in support and against the motion and the potential build. 'Any political advisor would be obviously saying 'you're an idiot and you're not a very good politician', but I hope that underlines my sincerity both a year ago and tonight and it has nothing to do with politics and it has everything to do with trying to do the right thing.'

Gallo said he initially voted against the site solely due to concerns over its suitability.

'My vote was intended to send a message to find another location. My internal struggle was clear at the table on February 13, 2024, when I said, 'I feel like I am forced to make a decision even though there is an overwhelming need and no alternative.' I proposed an alternative site at that meeting with no real traction,' he said. 'Like many in our community, I had hoped that a more appropriate site could be identified. After a year of discussion and exploration, no viable alternative site has come forward. Meanwhile, the urgent need for transitional housing inside our community has not diminished.

'Every day that passes without action is another day that some of our most vulnerable residents remain without safe and stable shelter. I am well aware that my actions one year ago has delayed the provision of safe and stable shelter for our most vulnerable. I cannot change that decision. I truly felt I was doing the right thing. Given these realities, I have taken the time to reconsider my position. Leadership requires us to adapt when circumstances demand it. While the proposed location may not be ideal, the greater priority must be ensuring those in need have access to support and services. A shelter is not just a place to sleep; it is a foundation for rebuilding lives, fostering stability, and helping individuals regain their independence.'

While he said he recognized the concerns voiced by residents at the podium on Tuesday evening, he said moving ahead on the site in question should be done with strong oversight and 'ongoing dialogue' to address any issues that arise.

SUPPORT

Support for Councillor Gallo's motion came first from Ward 1 Councillor Ron Weese, who said he respected Gallo's 'courage' in bringing the matter back to the table. Weese said his support for the project still remains following Council's decision last year, and has only grown in the months since.

'This motion tests our principles of equity and inclusion. Our Town has embraced inclusion, yet for some reason we are considering excluding vulnerable men who need both shelter and assistance in learning to work and to regain their dignity,' he said, questioning the merits of a letter sent to the Town by the Region stating the site in question was not being considered. '[The letter] said they had no authority (to consider the site) and they have no authority because we didn't give them authority to bring this back. They haven't

considered this, yet in a report the Region put out two months ago, they noted [the location] was under-developed. That suggests to me there is an opportunity for that one. However, they have also said that they are looking for two to three other ones in this Region and all I am suggesting is that we ought to be one of those people, one of those Councils, one of those municipalities who stand up and say, 'Yes, in my back yard.'

Support for the motion also came from Ward 2 Councillor Rachel Gilliland and Ward 3 Councillor Wendy Gaertner.

Councillor Gilliland said she wanted to thank residents who came forward for sharing their compassion, their heart and support for much-needed housing.

She said she was 'disappointed' to hear people in the community say they had had enough on discussing the project.

'I say the humans that don't have a home or a roof over their heads, they don't have enough. They need our help, they need our compassion, support, to help them get on their feet. People have this vision of what a homeless person is supposed to look like: un-showered, unkempt, on the streets, not really looking well-presented; the reality is homeless people could be your co-worker down the hall, a nurse, a contractor or a construction worker. We have heard the stories of people living in their van working full time but they don't have a home. This is a resource that we as a community can provide to lift these people up and give them a new start with the basic needs of shelter,' she said.

Added Councillor Gaertner: 'If this does come back from the Region, I would ask a few things: I would like to know what alternative sites were that they looked at, and I would like to know why they were turned down. I would like to know if they will follow up with the prototype from Durham Region has for its new transitional shelter that has addressed everything over 50 meetings. There was a motion from this Council to find three alternative viable sites in Aurora and the motion said that our Town staff should do this in collaboration with the Region and as Councillor said, I think it was eight months later, ten months later, they haven't heard anything. Councillor Gallo verified it at our last meeting in 2024. I think it's a fair motion and I will be supporting it.'

OPPOSITION

Opposition to Councillor Gallo's motion came from Mayor Tom Mrakas, Ward 4 Councillor Michael Thompson and Ward 6 Councillor Harold Kim.

First to speak was Councillor Thompson who said the Region was looking for a York-wide solution to the issue.

'They (the Region) are currently assessing a broad range of potential sites all aimed at addressing the pressing and recognized need for emergency and traditional housing. Once this evaluation is complete and viable sites have been identified, York Region will collaborate with municipalities and key stakeholders to ensure the development of this facility aligns with both local planning policies and the community's input. This process has been ongoing for some time and we anticipate a report will [come to Council] as early as April or as late as June,' he said.

'Therefore, I believe it is prudent to allow the Region to complete the thorough work they have already begun. Let them determine the most appropriate site, whether in Aurora, East Gwillimbury, Markham, Vaughan or any of the other nine municipalities in York Region. It is important that we respect their evidence-based approach in the site selection process. Once their findings are presented, if we find a reason to disagree with their conclusions, we will have an opportunity for dialogue. At that point, we can voice our concerns, discuss potential issues, and/or propose alternative solutions.'

Speaking against the motion, Councillor Kim said the issue at hand has 'divided' Aurorans.

'Let me say that I am not against the men's transitional shelter, but the process in how we got here by the Region is certainly not desirable. I have spoken with the Region and charitable organizations about having a location for housing, for those who have been sex slaves and human trafficked, and I can tell you that when those locations are looked at, absolutely no one wants them in their

neighbourhood?

?I can tell you very few people are going to be supportive of that type of housing. It's unfortunate. [Whatever the outcome is], I hope that we can all come back as one. Now, given the Region's communication today, it seems like the logical roadmap is to hear what they have to say.?Mayor Mrakas went on to acknowledge the ?passion? on both sides of the issue and insisted that as the land has been ?identified as a strategic location for the current and future infrastructure needs of the community? no builds would take place.

?This location was determined to be unsuitable two years ago, remained unsuitable a year ago, and continues to be unsuitable today. Nothing about the location has changed. The motion does nothing but create false hope for the vocal few who are fixated on this site, to the exclusion of consideration of any more suitable sites, while causing frustration for the majority of the community that expects site selection to be a fact-based decision,? he said.

?What I will say though is I find it truly disappointing, and I think Councillor Kim touched on it, that some individuals have taken a stance that anyone opposing this unsuitable location is opposed to helping the marginalized in our community or addressing the rising homelessness issue across the Province. It is both untrue and deeply offensive. As I said many times before, the best decisions for our community are based on facts, not emotions. I will continue to work with my Regional colleagues to make evidence-based decisions and look forward to approving optimal locations that provide the best service to those in need as well as the surrounding community, because that is how you get things done and get them done right.?

By Brock Weir