

Councillor formally calls for re-think on men's transitional housing project

There might still be a future for a men's emergency and transitional housing project in Aurora's south end.

This month, following a motion put forward last week by Ward 5 Councillor John Gallo, local lawmakers could be called upon to formally ask the Region to re-submit its application for the 55-bed building proposed by the Region for Regionally-owned land on Yonge Street, just south of the Railway Bridge and Industrial Parkway.

Council turned down the project last winter, citing issues with location and the planning process, on a vote of 4 to 3, instead tasking the Town and the Region to come up with alternative proposals.

Councillor Gallo, one of the four Council members who originally voted against the proposal, said with no alternatives on the horizon, it's time to take another look as the urgency for such a building has only become clearer in time.

The proposal conforms with the Town's Official Plan, said Gallo in his motion, adding there is sufficient servicing on site to make it a reality.

Should the motion be passed by Council on February 25, the Region will be asked to resubmit their zoning bylaw amendment for further consideration.

"As you all know, I voted against it in February - not that I was against the concept, but I was against the location, hoping that a better location could be found. We are now a year in and no better location has been found. If I am to weigh on the balance men being in the street versus a non-optimal location, I am going to lean towards the non-optimal location.

"I am now putting it back in the hands of York Region to resubmit an application for the site."

Councillor Gallo placed his motion on Committee of the Whole agenda the day before the February 11 meeting. While the Town Clerk said that the motion was filed appropriately, Council members voted to defer a decision until the formal Council meeting at the end of the month to give some additional time for consideration. A delay, they said, would also give Mayor Tom Mrakas, who was absent from last week's meeting due to a conference, a chance to provide his views at the table.

"A topic such as this should require all members of Council to be present to discuss," said Ward 6 Councillor Harold Kim. "Seeing that the Mayor is our lone representative on Regional Council, it would make sense for him to be present."

Ward 4 Councillor Michael Thompson, who chaired last week's meeting, agreed, adding: "I am supportive of the deferral because the Mayor is the only member of York Region Council [for Aurora] and he may have additional information that may prove helpful, insightful with regards to the motion."

Similar views were offered by Ward 2 Councillor Rachel Gilliland who said allowing a motion to be put on the agenda 24 hours before the meeting was a procedural flaw that needed to be addressed. Despite calls for a deferral, she said she was in favour of the spirit of Gallo's motion.

"I love this motion and [a delay] is not going to change my discussion at Council to be quite honest because this is something I am passionate about," she said.

The delay won't change the minds of local housing advocates, either.

Representatives for both Aurora Cares - Housing for All, a group of advocates at the community level, and Blue Door, which provides emergency and transitional spaces in York Region, hailed Councillor Gallo's motion as a step in the right direction.

'We're excited that Councillor Gallo is bringing this forward and we give all compliments to him. It is not easy to look back on a decision that has been previously made and then turn around and do a 180. I believe the 180 he's making is the right decision and the right course of action,' said Aurora Cares' Housing for All's Adam Mobbs, adding the approach shows 'good governance.'

The motion as it is written right now is to invite the Region back to apply. I would love to see both staff and Council explore something more creative. Rather than just inviting the Region back, what I would love for them to consider is doing an automatic approval of the application and then the Region just has to come to the table and submit a building permit. Rather than saying, 'We want you to apply again', we're going to turn around and say, 'This is approved. Let's come to the table and let's work together.'

When we look at the site, we have to remember that there has been work completed on the site since as early as 2019. There have been years of planning and preparation, there have been a lot of expenses put forward towards that site, so it is literally shovel ready and we cannot say that with regards to any project in York Region. When the Region first started looking at that site, they were only looking for one emergency and transitional home. They are now looking at two across York Region. That is how far we are behind. In order to catch up 'I'm not even saying 'get ahead' ' that's the only viable site at this time. Another location would take years of planning and preparation and the reality is the end of those years at planning and preparation you risk the same result.'

Although there has been some work completed, such as landscaping, on the site in question, Blue Door CEO Michael Braithwaite says it's all easily reversible.

Any effort on Regional Councillors and in communities to push affordable housing in their communities forward should be congratulated and celebrated, so Councillor Gallo doing this 'that's amazing. For him, it is a big person who steps forward and says, 'If I had it to do over again, I would have pushed through the first time, but I know what I know now,' says Braithwaite.

We're seeing an increased amount of people experiencing homelessness, of men experiencing homelessness. That number, they predict, could grow to 300,000 in the next 10 years if serious action isn't taken. Yes, we have seen an increase. I applaud York Region because they have made huge efforts by leaps and bounds to add many, many more beds, many of those at Blue Door, but it is still not enough and they know that. The need is higher than it has ever been' when you have things like tariffs that have increased costs and decrease of affordability, it hurts our most vulnerable the most.' Since June of 2024, the Region has approved its Homelessness Service System Plan and Rapid Deployment Actions strategy which has resulted in the addition of 43 beds across existing emergency and transitional housing locations, with an additional 50 seasonal shelter beds also in the equation, according to Lisa Gonsalves, Commissioner of Community and Health Services for the Region.

York Region appreciates the ongoing engagement of members of Aurora Council and residents around emergency and transitional housing,' says Gonsalves. 'The Region is open to considering any sites supported by local municipalities for the purposes of emergency and transitional housing.'

By Brock Weir