

Further locations for transitional housing to be explored this fall, but group aims to change minds



A report on alternative locations within Aurora for a proposed transitional and emergency housing build by York Region is expected before Council this fall, but a group of advocates is intent on convincing lawmakers to take a second look at a site in the Town's south-end.

While Council is on its summer recess, municipal staff are working behind the scenes to follow Council direction on finding alternatives following their rejection of an initially-proposed site on Yonge Street, just south of Industrial Parkway South.

This first site, which was slated to be built on a Region-owned plot of land near an adjacent pumping station, was rejected by Council earlier this year by a narrow margin, with those opposed to the build citing location and poor planning.

After turning down the plan, however, they tasked staff with finding alternative locations within Town.

Marco Ramunno, Aurora's Director of Planning, reiterated to The Auroran last week the position taken at Council at the end of June that meetings were ongoing with staff at York Region Housing on just such alternatives.

There was no information to provide Council at their June 25 meeting, but he indicated there could be an update as early as next month.

In the absence of alternatives, the citizen-led group Aurora Cares: Housing for All, has been making the case for the initial location throughout the community, including a regular presence at the Aurora Farmers' Market and on social media.

"We still believe this site is by far the most superior site that the Region and the Town of Aurora will come across," says Aurora Cares' Adam Mobbs. "We believe it is appropriate to revisit the site and build what has already been invested in and serve our community effectively. It's a stunning site; it really is."

Since Aurora Cares began to take shape this past spring, Mobbs says the positive response to their mission has been "absolutely amazing" and they hope to keep the momentum going as Council prepares to revisit the issue.

"I truly believe our community cares, I truly believe our community is inclusive, and I truly believe that our community believes this is the right solution. It just took them a little while to come to the table," says Mobbs. "Now that they're at the table and they want to have some productive discussions going forward."

The residential community near the proposed site had a strong presence in Council Chambers when the matter was last before

lawmakers, underlining a number of concerns ranging from safety within the neighbourhood to the proximity of the build in relation to employment opportunities.

Residents who spoke were overwhelmingly opposed to the plan, but there was still some support from within the neighbourhood.

Mobbs says he has been heartened that some of the members who have joined Aurora Cares come from that community.

'They were always in support of the application, but I just think they felt it was maybe not appropriate to come forward and may be in the minority,' he says. 'I think that as time has gone by, they have realized they are actually part of the majority and there are some members who truly care about being inclusive in the community' and now they feel they have a voice through Aurora Cares: Housing for All. They are excited to have a voice and they are excited to be at the table.

'Aurora Cares has been having discussions with every single member of Council back as early as March. To date, I think we have met with every member of Council. We have divided and conquered. We have had productive discussions. We wanted to learn and understand what their concerns were and then once we learned and understood what their concerns had been we've gone back to the table, had discussions, done our research and then provided some information to help those members of Council reconsider their opinions. I sincerely believe we have and we will see something positive in the future.'

This is a hope shared by Michael Braithwaite, CEO of Blue Door, the shelter and housing provider that has vied to operate the facility should it come to fruition.

'With this project, the community has been very supportive, Council and Mayor have been so supportive' you see the community can get behind it,' says Braithwaite. 'With the Aurora project, one of the silver linings is'over 300 community members have come together to say 'we care about our most vulnerable, we know this is happening in Aurora and we want to do something about it.' They're really pushing Council to do more.

'It just means so much more because it's community for community. I think it's incredible and I am so excited to see Aurora Cares: Housing for All pushing that forward. I think this is a group of people who are going to get something done. I think Council and Mayor are both saying, 'I hear there's a need, I want to work with you,' but at the end of the day we know action is what really matters and I'm hopeful that action will happen soon.'

By Brock Weir