

Location, noise and safety among residents? issues with men's housing proposal

More than 50 residents came to the podium in-person and virtually last Tuesday to speak out on a proposed men's transitional and emergency housing facility in Aurora's south end.

Originally slated to be built on a Regionally-owned plot of land on Yonge Street near the foot of Industrial Parkway South, members of the surrounding community against having such a residence close to their neighbourhood were the prevailing voices in the room.

Among their concerns were the appropriateness of the site (including its location close to a pumping station, their neighbourhood, and a perceived distance to amenities), community safety, traffic impacts, and how to care for the community's most vulnerable.

This week, The Auroran will share a cross-section of the public feedback voiced to Council on February 13, on both sides of the issue with the below representing some of the comments against the Region of York's plan.

Tonya, a resident of Aurora's southwest, said she had pressed the Region for more information on why this location was chosen for the men's transitional building, including a list of other locations considered for the build, but this information was not forthcoming.

"I want to just acknowledge that I care deeply for the importance of caring for the most vulnerable people in our community, so I am deeply concerned [about] a multi-site assessment," she said. "This is a due process system and I am concerned about the due process that must be taken to assess the proper site for the location of this building, which will house some of the most vulnerable members of our society."

"Without due process, we're undermining the trust that us, the taxpayers, have in the systems that give us what we need to survive in our communities - York Region, our Council and our Mayor. This is undermining the trust we have in you. During this vital decision-making process, the selection of the site - you must listen to this: undermining these kinds of processes are extremely dangerous to our democracy and what we create is a peaceful community. This room is filled for a reason."

Also speaking against the project from a land use perspective was Nisha who said the location presented was "not suitable" due to density enshrined in Official Plan legislation protecting Oak Ridges Moraine lands.

"OPA 34 requires that a legal agreement is in place when density is transferred to ensure that the land will remain in an undeveloped and natural form in perpetuity," she said. "The Town has failed to meet the requirements of this section as there is no legal agreement in place. The fact the development is within a cluster residential and the use is institutional is irrelevant. If the Town took the appropriate steps at the time the density went to zero, there would be a legal binding agreement in place and any development on these lands would be a breach of that agreement. This property is located within the settlement area of the Oak Ridges Moraine, but this does not mean that we need to develop every inch of this property."

Similarly, resident Mike agreed that the proposal doesn't conform to OPA 38 and particularly cited noise issues related to the Region's nearby pumping station and noise from the GO Train line.

"The noise impact study for 14452 Yonge Street paid for by York Region identified the noise level from the combined transportation sources, meaning Yonge Street and rail, on the building will exceed the Ministry of the Environment Conservation and Parks requirements. This was recorded at 70 decibels. For everyone here's reference, your vacuum cleaner is 75," he said, before pulling a small battery-powered vacuum cleaner out of a bag to demonstrate the noise.

"The noise study left out three vital factors very conveniently. It did not take into account any vibration from the train tracks or pumping station. When the primary purpose of the facility is to rehabilitate men suffering from mental health and addiction treatment and withdrawals, it's a problem. Studies show the noise and vibrations have a negative effect on people when it comes to mental health and addiction recovery. This location will actually hurt the men and their recovery efforts."

Planning was also on the mind of Rosie who said she too believes in 'helping those in need.'

'But this is absolutely the wrong location,' she said, offering Council members three points to consider, including the proximity of the shelter to a pumping station as placing a site like this near such infrastructure was 'very discriminatory' against the unhoused.

'[They] will need to deal with the constant noise from the [operation and maintenance] of this equipment,' she said of the pumping station, which has the capacity to move 80 litres of sewage each second. 'While the building is located 34 metres from the sewage pump, the location of the lot requires all visitors to pass the equipment at close range every time they enter or exit the facility.'

Odour from the pumping station, she contended, could result in fatigue, loss of appetite and headaches.

'I would also like to speak to the fact this proposed location actually discriminates against the unhoused in both fact and perception. What else would you put in this location? A day care? An apartment building? A nursing home? If the answer is no other population would go in there, I think the answer is very clear. York Region study indicated noise and train tracks is above the allowable limits and guess what their solution was? Keep the windows closed.'

Melissa was of a similar viewpoint, stating that while she agrees 'this initiative is imperative and of high importance' more time was needed to find a 'more suitable location' for the facility.

'The selection of a homeless shelter should meet the same standards as a school, church, community centre, and should promote the personal and spiritual and professional growth of these residents. A site selection should consider the following but not limited to proximity to service, capacity and expansion potential, community integration and outdoor amenities,' she said.

'It is important to select a location that fosters positive interaction with shelter residents and the surrounding community. This location does not offer this integration opportunity as the shelter is located isolated deep in the woods and in a community that is removing employment and medical resources that are imperative for reintegration'. [It's about] more than just providing a shelter. It's ensuring that individuals have the support, resources and opportunities to become active, contributing members of their community.'

By Brock Weir
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