

Men's emergency shelter eyed for south Aurora

For more than 40 years, Porter Place in East Gwillimbury has been York Region's emergency shelter for men. But now that the building is nearing the end of its practical life, the Region is looking to lay the foundations of a purpose-built shelter in Aurora's south end.

The Region is eyeing 14452 Yonge Street, located on the west side of the road just south of the railway bridge, as a possible location for the shelter, one which would be built in conjunction with a new regional pumping station.

Officials made their pitch to Aurora Council last week, stating that the facility, if realized to its full vision, will not only be a shelter for men in need but also a resource to help them get back on their feet.

“With the current facility, there is limited opportunity for expansion and program enhancements,” said Monica Bryce, Acting General Manager of Social Services for the Region of York. “Transit is also limited at the current location and so to get to work or training, many choose to walk along Highway 11 towards Green Lane. Since early 2012, we have been shifting our model in the Region away from the traditional shelter model to a more holistic model that includes a wider range of programming to meet a wider variety of needs, including transitional housing. It is not just about emergency shelter; it is about helping people settle into housing.

“Homelessness is a reality for only a very small portion of York Region residents and there is no single contributing factor to homelessness.”

A “typical” Porter Place client is “a Canadian citizen, roughly middle age, who has experienced either a housing breakdown, an illness, job loss, or has been impacted by the rising housing costs in York Region,” she said.

The majority of clients have a one-time stay and are able to connect with resources during their time there that can help ease their housing stability.

The new Aurora facility would be designed on three key pillars: preventing homelessness before it starts, providing inclusive, client-centred programs to support recovery, and ending homelessness.

“The intention is not to move Porter Place—a new facility will be intentionally-designed to help men find and keep housing, address the reason for their homelessness, find stability in their lives, and maintain that stability by continuing to provide support, even once they have left the emergency housing facility.”

This approach, she added, is similar to that carried out by Belinda's Place, the Newmarket-based shelter for women “and will be operated by a third party as well.

“By finding an operator who can support the men who come to the new facility, we can have the same success as we have seen at Belinda's Place. Safety and security are important features of the design and to make sure the physical space lets people feel secure both inside and outside the facility; we will engage a safety and security specialist to perform a comprehensive security assessment of both the physical location and surrounding community, and provide recommendations to promote safety for all.

“It is our goal always not just to be a good neighbour but to be an excellent one and all the concerns from the community are always considered when we go into the planning of our services.”

To that end, public engagement will be carried out over the next 12 months.

“One of the key factors we bring to Housing York Region (HYR)'s model is we have a functional design,” said Josh Scholten, Director of Housing Development and Asset Strategy. “From a building perspective, we want to make sure it works for the folks

who will live there and it also work for the community as well. That means something that is appropriate scale too, right-sized for the community.?

The Region has been looking at options to replace Porter Place since 2018.

\$15 million has been set aside by the Region of York for the project.

The property in question was purchased in 2019 to build the Henderson Pumping Station, but it became clear there was an option to co-locate both the station and the shelter on the same site.

?We do have confidence we can fit it there,? said Mr. Scholten. ?It is centrally located site with access to transit. It is sufficient to fit the facility here and, from a public perspective too, we have services at the site, which is a good use for public funds for purchasing the site.?

Responding to the Region's proposal, Councillor Wendy Gaertner said co-locating both facilities on the property might work, but said zoning issues needed to be worked through. Councillor Rachel Gilliland said it was also important to consider ?connectivity? and ensure active transportation is part of the plan.

?Hearing feedback from residents, I think this is a good opportunity for Aurora to play a role in helping to support those who need it and look forward to continuing this journey with you and seeing the outcome.?

The Region hopes to have building approvals complete by the end of July 2022, the pumping station by the Spring of 2023, and the potential shelter by the end of 2024.

For more information, visit York.ca/menshousing.

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