

Men's emergency, transitional housing plan nixed by Council on 4 ? 3 vote

The Region of York is going back to the drawing board after Council last week rejected a proposal for a 55-bed men's emergency and transitional housing building in Aurora's south end.

Proposed to be built on Regionally-owned land on the west side of Yonge Street, just south of the railway bridge at Industrial Parkway South, co-located on the site with a pumping station, the plan was the subject of intense debate ? not just in Council chambers, where it was the subject of a February 13 Public Planning meeting lasting more than six hours, but within the wider community.

Proponents of the plan said a new facility, which would replace Porter Place in East Gwillimbury, was urgently needed to combat homelessness in York Region. Detractors, on the other hand, argued the Aurora site was the wrong location, citing concerns ranging from accessibility to security within the surrounding neighbourhood.

Council ultimately sided with the majority of delegates at the podium on a vote of 4 ? 3, with Mayor Tom Mrakas, Ward 4 Councillor Michael Thompson, Ward 5 Councillor John Gallo, and Ward 6 Councillor Harold Kim opting to reject the proposal then and there rather than advancing it to further discussion at an upcoming General Committee meeting.

While residents opposed to the plan celebrated their win into the wee hours of Wednesday morning, disappointment was expressed later in the week by Michael Braithwaite, CEO of Blue Door Shelters, which was tapped by the Region to run the facility if approved. Similar sentiments were also offered by Newmarket Mayor John Taylor in his capacity as Chair of Housing York, the leading driver behind the proposal.

?We are deeply disappointed in the outcome of the meeting,? said Braithwaite. ?The team at Blue Door, along with our partners at the Region and in the sector, remain committed to creating affordable housing for all in need. To men experiencing homelessness, we are sorry this didn't go through. We will continue to be here for you as you work through your housing journey and will push harder than ever for new forms of affordable housing so you can feel safe, supported and cared for.?

Added Mayor Taylor: ?As Chair of Housing York, I am deeply disappointed with the decision of Aurora Council to stop the much-needed York Region Emergency and Transitional Housing Project. This project was first presented to Aurora Council in 2021 where no concerns were raised. The project has undergone significant and thorough planning and consultation. Any shelter site will meet with some public resistance, but we must provide safe and dignified housing for those that are unhoused.

?As we fail to provide housing and shelter, we should not be surprised to find people living in our parks and in our bus shelters. The need is growing greater, and the time to act is now.?

Here is how the debate unfolded at Aurora's Public Planning meeting:

MAYOR TOM MRAKAS (NO)

Speaking against the proposal, Mayor Tom Mrakas said ?nothing? presented by the Region and its planners had changed in the year since it was last before Council to address concerns expressed by lawmakers and members of the public.

While he said ?transitional housing is urgently needed in every community in the Region,? that was not what was at issue at last Tuesday's meeting.

?The decision before Council tonight is not whether we support the need for transitional housing or emergency shelter; it is whether the proposed site meets planning requirements to successfully locate this much-needed facility,? he said, noting that, in his view, the plan did not constitute ?good planning? principles.

It was a matter rooted in the Official Plan (OPA 34) that mandates no more than eight units total for the site.

?That is more than six times the allowable units,? he continued. ?I ask simply that everyone at this table consider if any other applicant came forward ? say a developer, with an application for 55 units and a condominium, a hotel, a seniors' residence, or if it was institutional use for a church, a conference centre, or long-term care home ? would we approve it at this location? I don't believe we would.?

Applicants, he added, were ?aware of the planning challenges on site? when they bought it for the pumping station and the application for transitional housing ?completely reneges? on their approved site plan agreement.

?Our Council is charged with the responsibility to make decisions that serve the community's best interest, particularly concerning development. I have remained steadfast in my commitment to appropriate development, development that adheres [to] and aligns with the Town's planning principles?. I refuse to be pressured into making a poor planning decision for the community that I represent just so some politicians can check a box, pat themselves on the back, and claim that they have accomplished something.?

With just one site presented as an option for the project after a potential deal to retrofit the former Howard Johnson's site in Aurora for these purposes fell through, he said Council was presented with a ?take it or leave it decision? that is ?deeply, deeply disappointing.?

WARD 1 COUNCILLOR RON WEESE (YES)

In making his decision, Councillor Weese said Council got caught up in the ?emotion? of the debate but, at the end of the day, it was a matter of ?inclusivity.?

?We work very hard (for inclusivity) in this Town,? he said. ?We have a strategy for diversity, equity and inclusion and this is an opportunity to test that from an inclusion standpoint. I am in favour of moving this forward to the next step because I don't want this to fall flat. I agree with (other lawmakers) that this can be made better. There are some items that have been brought forward here [and] I would certainly like the Region to actually address the alternate places because I don't think it has been yet.

?If this does pass and it does go through to General Committee, I would expect that every one of these questions have been answered so the residents are not fearful of this and that it is an appropriate use of the land.?

To this end, he noted he was in favour of sending that to Committee rather than another Public Planning meeting to give the Region ?their last grasp at this to see if this can be saved because they have answered all the questions of the residents in that area.?

WARD 2 COUNCILLOR RACHEL GILLILAND (YES)

Speaking in favour of the housing project, Councillor Gilliland said there is a ?hidden community of humans in our neighbourhoods that are in need of desperate assistance? and this extends even to those who might be working a full-time job.

?I have been contacted by residents both for and against, which I can really relate to,? she said. ?I want to take the opportunity to take that time to listen to everybody, but what I can confirm is this is an Aurora problem. I have heard personal experiences right now as I speak to you that this is needed and there are people who are in vestibules and parking lots and such. I have heard from past Citizens of the Year from Aurora, long-time residents who were homeless and had used these services and I have heard stories of people who had relatives that have urgently needed the services and unfortunately had perished right here in Aurora. I say these things because I heard a lot of, ?It's not Aurora's problem, they come from everywhere.' I am just really sad in the sense that we ignore the fact it is here and we're going through an extremely difficult time these last 12 months with inflation.?

Adding that Council has known about the plan since 2021, she pushed back on claims from residents who said it was ?inappropriate?

to build housing like this near train tracks and pumping stations, citing noise, adding that multi-million-dollar homes are often built ? and sold ? close to similar infrastructure.

?Have we set the bar (for planning) so high that nothing is ever achievable? That's the sentiment I'm feeling,? she said, adding that while she is running to secure the candidacy for the Conservative Party of Canada in Aurora's south riding, ?putting politics ahead of people is not something I am willing to entertain.?

?If that means it puts my future journey at risk, so be it. I have ethics and principles that are going to guide my decision tonight. We need this kind of housing for people. People need homes. It is evident. We're desperate, we're in a housing crisis. We all unanimously supported a motion to address the homelessness crisis and work in collaboration with the Region and the Province when these opportunities are presented to us and in actionable time. That's what crisis means. Is that motion all just for naught? Is that just a grandstanding vote? Are we serious about that vote??

WARD 3 COUNCILLOR WENDY GAERTNER (YES)

Making her argument, Councillor Gaertner said both the subject and the decision were ?important? for many reasons and, in spite of her environmental record, said that legislation related to the Oak Ridges Moraine had been changed at Council for less.

?We have changed zoning ? and, you know what? We have done it to advantage developers,? she contended. ?If we really want to look at this from that point of view, then I would be all in favour for this land to ignore some of those things for human life, for diminishing the homelessness that we do have in Aurora.

?There is no doubt of the health and wellbeing of people. That could be us. I will vote to move this forward to General Committee.?

WARD 4 COUNCILLOR MICHAEL THOMPSON (NO)

In voting against the plan, Councillor Thompson cited both transparency and action from the Region. Further information from the Region was essential, he said, to address concerns of residents and Councillors alike.

But, at the end of the day, it came down to the site itself.

?On this four-acre parcel, if it was still developable, the maximum allowed would have been eight units and not 55+,? he said. ?However, the Region is looking to circumvent these policies by using the exemption afforded institutional zoning. While they may claim as institutional it conforms? OPA 34 specifically says that suitable forms of supportive housing are permitted subject to compatibility with the surrounding residential fabric and whether there is a different range of services available.?

To him, ?residential fabric? entailed ?seamless integration, something he argued fell well short.

?I do not see how this application is compatible with the surrounding residential fabric, how it will seamlessly integrate and contribute to the character of the neighbourhood, how it will coexist without the possibility of one or more adverse effects or how it is in keeping with the spirit and intent of OPA 34.?

Further, he said if the housing proposal had been built first, he doubted Council or the Region would have voted to build the now-extant pumping station so close with the residence.?

WARD 5 COUNCILLOR JOHN GALLO (NO)

Speaking against the proposal, Councillor Gallo had sharp words for regional planners who, he said, took more than a year to come back to another public meeting in spite of the ?urgency? they say the building is needed.

?We can't speak out of both sides of our mouth ? we can't say there's urgency for something and take a full year to come back to this table [and figure out] if we're going to go forward or not,? he said, pressing Regional staff for what their ?Plan B? was if Council rejects the plan. ?You should anticipate that possibility and have an additional Plan B if that happens to deal with a very serious issue. I feel like I am being pressured to make a decision?because [there's] an overwhelming need but no alternatives and I have a problem [with] that.

?I won't be voting in favour of this, but not because I think it effects the residents in that area, not because I am concerned about the security, not because I am concerned about the prices [of] their homes, not because of the many things that were said at the podium. I have said this to anyone who has contacted me on both sides that my overwhelming issue is that sewage station?

?I have repeated this over and over that nothing would be built there and you wouldn't put a Belinda's Place (Women's Shelter, Newmarket) there. It would have been a non-starter. You wouldn't have put a youth centre there; It would be a non-starter?. No developer would ever build any residential near that pumping station. Why would we put men there that are in need.?

WARD 6 COUNCILLOR HAROLD KIM (NO)

Ahead of his vote, Councillor Kim said he didn't expect any place to be ?approved smoothly? but said the Region ?did itself no favour? by not analysing more sites, complete with pros and cons, for consideration ? ?even if all the sites were in Aurora.?

?Instead, the Region chose this one site and put forward every case as to why this site is perfect. It seems there was no objectivity in its own business case other than there is a need.?

The Town fought more than a decade ago for two units per acre in this area through OPA 34 and this is something ?we have been leveraging?with other developers when they come into this area and try to intensify and we have been very successful at that.?

?Five or six years ago when we were approached by York Region Housing? with potential plans to transform the old Howard Johnson's into the men's transitional shelter I was all in for that,? he said. ?I was not the only Council member last term that was in favour of hosting this need at Howard Johnson's, there were others. I bring this up because for me it is not about submitting to the pressure of the public.

?I am not against [a transitional home] in Aurora. I have been challenged over the last several months and increasingly so in the last couple of weeks by others to do the right thing. Is the right thing to make an emotional decision, to choose one option, one site? It's not [in] between because?that assumes there at least two options?. There should be a shelter for the homeless. As the population rises and economic pressures persist, there will be a growing need for shelters. I believe all municipalities should bare the responsibilities of homeless men in transition.

?Would everyone agree Aurora has a social responsibility to those less fortunate? Based on the many good people I know, yes. What I find discouraging in this whole process is the Region's only criteria in my opinion for finding a suitable opinion was dollars and cents? Despite the challenges of this process, I don't believe we should hold those who need this facility?hostage. I am open to working with the Region to have a transition shelter in Aurora. I believe the Region as part of its housing mandate should have serious conversations with every single municipality in York Region to ensure that a transitional shelter is on their roadmap. I will commit to working with the Region as will staff if Council agrees to finding a better location in Aurora.?

By Brock WeirEditorLocal Journalism Initiative Reporter