

Proposal for men's shelter stirs passionate opposition, support in Council chamber



Proposals for a new 68-bed men's shelter in Aurora to provide emergency and transitional housing remains in limbo after a heated Public Planning meeting last week.

On January 24, session lasting more than five hours was held to gain community feedback on the plan, which was brought forward by Housing York, a body of the Regional government that owns and operates 2,800 units in the community.

At issue were plans for a five-storey shelter at 14452 Yonge Street, just south of the railway bridge, which, if approved, would share a site with a sewage pumping station the Region is currently finishing.

If brought to fruition, the building would span 2,594 square metres and contain 55 units.

The plans brought a furious backlash from residents who said that while they didn't dispute the need for a men's shelter in the community, the location of Yonge and Industrial Parkway South missed the mark. Among the worries expressed at the meeting were impacts to community safety, area property values, and to the environment.

Supporters of the plan, however, argued that these fears were unfounded.

In the face of community opposition, Council voted against referring the proposal to the next level, instead opting for a further Public Planning meeting at which Council members said they hoped questions brought forward by residents would be addressed.

A new shelter in Aurora would replace Porter Place shelter on Gorham Street in Newmarket, according to Housing York. The current shelter is aging and there is little opportunity for expansion and program enhancement.

It cannot adequately support the range of programs needed to assist clients find and keep their housing while strengthening life stabilization, said Monica Sangoi, Manager of Homelessness Community Programs, Social Services, for the Region of York. In addition, the current property does not have the municipal services like water and sanitary servicing. Rather, it uses wells and septic tanks.

Porter Place is consistently full almost every day with an average occupancy of 100 per cent. At times, Porter Place has to use overflow beds set up in common areas to accommodate the volume of men that require emergency housing. Porter Place is York Region's only emergency housing facility that is dedicated to men.

Adding that recent statistics have shown that Porter Place clients have included 82 per cent Canadian citizens, with just over 50 per cent under the age of 40, and that 42 per cent were staying at a shelter for the first time, she said that there's 'no single contributing factor' that can lead to homelessness.

'Factors such as rising housing costs, a shortage of affordable and safe housing, lower incomes, illness, personal or family crisis and job loss are all contributing factors to homelessness,' she said. 'The COVID-19 pandemic has made it even harder for some of our most vulnerable residents to keep their housing. Many residents have experienced homelessness for the first time for the financial hardship [that occurred] during the pandemic.'

'Our intention is not to simply move Porter Place to a new location but rather to build a new multi-service emergency and transitional housing facility for men experiencing homelessness. The new building in Aurora will be more than just a place to stay. It will have skilled staff to help individuals strengthen their mental health and wellness, find and keep housing, increase life stability and develop important skills such as budgeting and literacy, and access education and job training to increase employment opportunities in the community.'

The proposed new site, she concluded, would feature tailored supports in a 'safe, inclusive environment' with a focus on people-centred programs to 'support recovery and autonomy.'

'The men who will use this building are looking for a safe and welcoming space to access services,' she concluded. 'They are our neighbours, our brothers, our fathers, our uncles and our sons. These men want to contribute to the community and find stable housing and employment. The new building in an accessible and central location will allow us to provide the supports and services these men need to build a bright future.'

Also presenting in favour of the plan was Melissa McEnroe, Manager of Affordable Housing Development and Housing Services for the Region. She said one of the reasons the Region is eyeing this location is that it is 'rare' to find a property 'with this much space around it.'

'This is not a cut and paste building from another site. We're using the best research and best practices to ensure that the project we're putting here meets the complex needs of those who will be receiving care,' she said.

Noting the community's opposition, she added: 'We all understand that people's feelings and perceptions and anecdotes are different than some points of data, and because of that we want to really ensure the community safety is our top priority. We do have someone on site 24-hours a day. We do have good neighbour agreements, which are expectations for our residents, to do that' and lastly we do all sorts of design elements in our buildings including better landscaping, outside seating areas, turning crime away from corners that could be dangerous. We build that all in.'

When all the community feedback was received, Ward 4 Councillor Michael Thompson said the issues raised that evening hadn't been adequately addressed and Council couldn't move forward with the recommendation to take plans to the next level.

'A pin needs to be put in it and further conversations and answers need to be provided to the residents, specifically around community safety,' he said. 'Yes, when York Region was at the podium they talked a little bit about it from a building perspective, but not necessarily from a community impact perspective. We always at this table talk about how important safety is, whether it be a crosswalk or a stop sign. The citizens of our community deserve to feel safe in their own homes and that question needs to be addressed. They need to understand the intake process better, they need to understand when there is an issue how is it going to be dealt with? All of that still remains to be heard and talked about, let alone the questions around the location?'

These views were shared by Ward 5 Councillor John Gallo who said he knew going into the meeting it was 'going to be a bit of a social experiment.' He had sharp words for Regional staff, whom he said 'failed' to acknowledge the public in the room.

‘It’s significant to me because we have to keep remembering that they are the ones that we serve. We’re public servants, we serve them. That tone threw me off from the get go. I think it’s a learning moment for all of us to make sure that we acknowledge the people that we serve,’ he said.

‘My gut is telling me that there are still so many unanswered questions. Are there too many unanswered questions that even if we go down that road that I am not sure I feel confident that it is the right place for this?’

It’s hypocritical, he concluded to ‘want to help people’ but ultimately put them ‘beside a sewage station.’

‘If the intent truly is to help these people, is that the right place, not only beside the residents, which is a huge issue, but beside a sewage pumping station and train tracks? It is almost a bit of a slap in the face to these people who need help. I’m sorry, but that’s the feeling I got while listening to everyone who spoke tonight.’

Continuing on this track, Ward 2 Councillor Rachel Gilliland agreed there were ‘unresolved issues.’

‘Clearly there are some things we want to resolve, whether it is the location or comfort with crime and safety and I am happy to make an amendment to address this to another Public Planning meeting at a future date,’ she said before doing just that.

‘We need to have those concerns of the residents addressed and then we can have a better, more fulsome or better result on this,’ added Ward 1 Councillor Ron Weese, with these sentiments being echoed by Ward 3 Councillor Wendy Gaertner.

At the end of the day, however, Mayor Tom Mrakas said there was one key question: ‘Is this the best location, or is it the most expedient option?’

‘We need more supportive housing in York Region,’ he said. ‘I have seen firsthand the need in our community and that need is simply staggering. From skyrocketing rents to dwindling or frankly non-existing availability of rental units, housing affordability has hit crisis proportions and it has had a devastating impact on those most vulnerable in the community.’

‘This hidden homelessness leads to significant undercounting of homelessness, which means the need for emergency and transitional housing is far greater than the numbers reported. There are people living rough right now in Aurora. People living in tents, people living in their cars, people living in bus shelters, and there are many more who are insecurely housed – those that shuffle from place to place, sleeping with friends and acquaintances wherever possible. Will residents that are in proximity to it feel safe? Will those who need to access the services feel safe? Is it sufficiently close to accessible transit options? Is it close enough to medical facilities for adequate access to care? Is it close to other services that marginalized residents need to access? What other locations we’ve heard in Aurora have been considered or could be considered for this facility that better addresses the security, accessibility, transit and other issues raised this evening?’

But a slightly different perspective was offered by Ward 6 Councillor Harold Kim who stated he would prefer to see the entire proposal for this location be shelved rather than coming back to a Public Planning session.

‘This is a tough discussion because York Region, which we are a part of, needs a transition shelter. In a compassionate society in which we live, we do need to have these discussions. Having volunteered working with the homeless, it has been my experience that the fear of the homeless is largely overblown. I do understand being a parent myself, I can see how perception and stereotype can be a reality.’

‘Can a project be successful when there’s such opposition? Not many neighbourhoods would accept or appreciate transitional housing, but the residents are unanimous and united. My hat’s off to all of you for rallying together in the short time you mentioned but based on what I’ve heard this evening – the residents don’t have the appetite to prolong the discussion at the Region.’

By Brock Weir
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