

Residents felt 'intimidated' at shelter meeting, says Councillor

People who came out to a Special Council meeting on March 18 related to the proposed men's transitional and emergency housing project in Aurora's south end felt 'intimidated' by a residents' group, according to Ward 1 Councillor Ron Weese.

Councillor Weese made his comments and offered an apology to residents on behalf of lawmakers at last week's Council meeting.

Speaking under New Business, Weese said the March 18 meeting was preceded by what can only be described as a rally, not publicly promoted, but featuring the Mayor and a select group of supporters in Council Chambers.

The rally clogged the Chambers prior to the meeting and members of the public arriving late were approached by many of the members of the rally group upon entry and asked about their interests, he said, referencing a group billing themselves as Aurora United. In some cases, these residents told me they took the 'Our Mayor Our Voice' stickers (being handed out by the group) and wore them out of fear of reprisals and a Town employee from Bylaw was asked to come and attend in anticipation of the problems.

Weese thanked Ward 4 Councillor Michael Thompson for asking the crowd to be 'courteous' prior to the meeting, but highlighted elements of what was ultimately a chaotic Council session.

The delegations in opposition to the motion were shouted down and, in many instances, Council could not hear the delegations from the crowd noise, Weese continued. Delegates felt intimidated, they told me. After the session I was asked how this could be allowed, [how] our Chambers had become an unsafe place where courteous and respectful discussion. They are right; Council Chambers should be respected and all delegates should be thanked for coming forth on all matters related to Council business. It is not easy, I know it isn't, so I would like to thank all those who came with good intentions to Council chambers to express their opinions in a respectful and courteous manner. I also want to express my disappointment that this blatant and contrived disruption occurred and was allowed.

On behalf of our Council, Town Staff, and those who came to participate in a democratic process of delegation, I apologize that your rights to express yourself were compromised and disrespected by some in the Chambers. I will attempt personally to avoid this in the future and I ask my Council colleagues to help ensure that Chambers are a place of respect and not fear.

The experience of these residents was underscored through a statement from the grassroots group Aurora Cares Housing for All.

While the meeting brought to light some anger and troubling behavior from a group in our Town, we witnessed inspiring moments of courage and humanity from members of Aurora Cares, they said in a statement. Special thanks to our members, who spoke passionately about our values: minority rights, human rights, and democracy. Their voices lit a path through the darkness, reminding us all why we stand together as a community.

Unfortunately, we have also received reports of our members being intimidated by another group in Town, with one instance involving physical intimidation. Such behavior has no place in our Town, and we are committed to ensuring safety and respect for all. Despite these challenges, the visibility of this issue and the use of Strong Mayor Powers within Aurora has drawn additional support and allies to our mission.

One such ally is the Ontario Alliance to End Homelessness, which has appealed to Premier Doug Ford and the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing, requesting a meeting to discuss solutions through the lens of the Province's efforts to build more homes, faster, and ensure every Ontarian has access to safe, affordable, housing.

Strong Mayor powers were vested in the Heads of Council of more than 40 Ontario municipalities to help facilitate Provincial priorities, including housing.

Mayor Mrakas has argued his veto was in line with this legislation as the land in question ?may? be used to advance like infrastructure projects, but declined to elaborate on what these uses might be when pressed last week by Ward 2 Councillor Rachel Gilliland to expand on his statement.

Nevertheless, the Alliance characterized the veto as a ?misuse? of authority.

?The Ontario Alliance to End Homelessness is deeply concerned by Mayor Mrakas' use of strong mayor powers in the Town of Aurora to veto council's vote in favour of building a men's emergency and transitional housing facility on public land,? wrote Alliance co-chairs Jennifer van Gennip, Dominica McPherson, and Kaite Burkholder Harris in their letter to the Premier and Minister. ?This is a decision against building more homes faster, as your government has so clearly prioritized.

?Rather than expediting the construction of housing, particularly affordable homes, as your government intended, these powers are being used to block affordable housing, particularly when approved by the local Council. This misuse of authority prioritizes NIMBY opposition over the urgent need to house vulnerable Ontarians, and has drawn criticism from the Ontario Human Rights Commission.

?With homelessness on the rise and thousands of families struggling to secure stable housing, it is critical that municipal leaders support solutions to the housing crisis.?

By Brock Weir