

Residents support mission of incoming Retail Cannabis Task Force

The creation of a new task force to look at the impacts of cannabis retail in Aurora has been backed by local residents who say they've been adversely affected by the placement of the stores — both as residents and business owners.

Council last week approved the establishment of a new Cannabis Retail Task Force that will review the experience of the Town of Aurora since opting in to cannabis retail stores and identify issues that have arisen related to public safety, land use, business clustering, signage, community perception, and economic development.

First proposed in a motion by Ward 5 Councillor John Gallo, the Task Force will also have its members — two members of Council, up to seven resident representatives, two members of Town Staff, and a member of the York Regional Police — explore best practices from other municipalities regarding cannabis retail management and community impact.

Council has received feedback from residents expressing both support and concern regarding the number, location, and community impacts of cannabis retail stores, said Councillor Gallo in his motion. Municipalities currently have limited authority under the provincial regulatory framework to influence the siting and density of cannabis retail stores, but continue to play an important role in community engagement, bylaw enforcement, public education, and advocacy to higher levels of government.

It is in the Town's interest to review the local impacts of retail cannabis stores — social, economic, and community — since opting in, and to identify potential strategies or advocacy opportunities to address any issues that have arisen.

One such issue was identified at the podium at last week's Council meeting when residents Juli and Ian Smith, along with Frank Marchese, came forward to speak about alleged illegal parking, loitering, abuse, and property value impacts related to one such dispensary on Yonge Street.

Our quality of life has been severely impacted, said Juli. We every day experience many homeless or unhoused people, customers, everybody trespassing on our property, parking in front of our driveway so that we can't get in or out at any time of day. We get a lot of cannabis garbage thrown around our property, on our property, and now we have people that come and look through the garbage hoping they're going to find something. When we approach them, we are basically abused and verbally abused by these people who say they have the right to park wherever they want to. I have been abused many times by many customers. My husband has as well.

On a daily basis, we have to deal with these people. Now that they spend a lot of time outside smoking, I see young families walking by with their kids and they have to be a part of this whole situation.

The Smiths said they have asked for help from Mayor and Council, the Town's bylaw department, and the Police to address many of these issues, particularly illegal parking, but were still waiting for that help.

I think it's the municipality's responsibility to see how they're impacting the municipality, said Ian. It's not an issue that is getting better. It's not an issue that's going to go away. I guess what we're asking is we'd like to bring some attention to it. We'd like a potential task force or a board to look into how these shops and residential areas are impacting the people that live around them.

Responding to the delegates, Councillor Gallo said their concerns haven't fallen on deaf ears.

The motion that's on the agenda tonight is to strike a task force to try and figure out a strategy, not just for you, but there may be others in the community that are experiencing the same thing, said Councillor Gallo, suggesting the delegates put themselves forward to serve on the task force.

Ward 2 Councillor Rachel Gilliland, who said she's been advocating for clear parking delineations in the area, said she hoped the

creation of the task force would create some ?collective solutions going forward to help the situation? and expressed ?disappointment? that resources expected to come from the Provincial government to help address some of the impacts of cannabis sales did not come forward.

?We also have another two or three other complaints from neighbourhoods that are similar and, in my experience here, it really is the ownership and there are some things owners can do in order to manage the customers that they have in their stores,? said Ward 1 Councillor Ron Weese.

Added Mayor Tom Mrakas: ?I think we're all looking forward to seeing the report and recommendations that come from the Task Force.?

By Brock WeirEditorLocal Journalism Initiative Reporter