

Supporters of transitional shelter state their case amid the shouts

Supporters of a proposed Men's Transitional and Emergency Housing facility in Aurora's south end made their feelings known at a raucous Council meeting last week.

Residents who came to Council last week to support efforts to override a veto from Mayor Tom Mrakas, reversing Council's decision to invite the Region back to the table and revisit the site as a possible location for such a build, were in the minority at March 18's Special Council meeting. They said, however, they represented the feelings of the wider community ? that if things were allowed to stand, it would set a bad precedent for democracy not just locally but within Ontario.

?We're really here tonight to talk about democracy and the respect for human rights,? said Steve Fleck, who ran for Council in 2022, referencing two letters sent to Aurora by the Ontario Human Rights Commission cautioning the municipality on delaying the build. ?Democracy is under threat internationally, nationally, and here in Canada ? and even locally here in Aurora.?

Fleck said his view on Strong Mayor powers ? and the veto mechanism that comes with it ? hadn't changed since he first offered them to Council in 2023, that it ?would eliminate one of the most fundamental principles of our system of democracy, parliamentary and government procedures that in all situations the majority should rule.?

?It is warping and distorting the governance here in Aurora,? he continued, addressing the question at hand. ?Democracy is not something you turn on or off. You are all in on it all the time. Sometimes a democracy doesn't always go the way you want it to, and that's okay. Sometimes in a democracy we lose the race or the vote and that is okay. The rules of the game were in place and, in the end, democracy was respected.

?If that political win comes when the rules of the game and democracy are tossed aside and into the ditch, where are we at? Strong Mayor powers was implemented?ostensibly to speed up the pace of building new homes and housing of all kinds in municipalities all across the Province in the face of the housing crisis. To the best of my knowledge, it has never been used for that purpose here in Aurora and ironically, just last week, Strong Mayor powers and vetoes were used here in Aurora indirectly to impede the progress of some potential housing being built. In closing, I was asked over the weekend by a contact in Aurora what team am I on with this? I said without hesitation, I am on the team that fully respects human rights and democracy. That should be really, really easy choice to make, I would think.?

Resident Susan Shaw offered a similar perspective. A resident of Aurora since 1977, she stated the Mayor was not speaking for her when he put the veto forward and she posed a number of questions to Mayor Mrakas in her delegation, including whether he supported the Regional Initiative on Homelessness and whether Aurora is working towards its goals.

?If your vision is Housing for All, and thereby including housing opportunities for all, why has the Town not provided more rental housing in recent years and why after supporting the Region's selection of a candidate site in the south end of Aurora did you suddenly veto the Council's latest vote on the matter?? she asked. ?I know you justified the vote by stating the site has been designated for other more important infrastructure purposes, but have those other more important purposes been approved by the Region or the Town? Is it not the role of the Region to determine whether the site still fits its well-researched criteria for a men's shelter and transition centre? It seems unethical to use this reason without having input and confirmation from the Region on its designated purpose for the property.?

Another long-time resident, Wendy Morihovitis, who identified herself as a supporter of Aurora Cares ? Housing for All, which has been a vocal proponent of the shelter build, offered a similar view.

?I believe democracy in this country, this Province, and this Town can be better. I am here to express my disappointment that Mayor Mrakas, the Mayor of this Town, vetoed [the motion] to reconsider the housing proposal. That motion was approved by a majority of the elected municipal officials in this Council Chamber, which means it was approved by elected representatives for the majority of

the people in Aurora,? she said.

?In the 2022 municipal election campaign, Mayor Mrakas said Strong Mayor Powers were not necessary and not needed. He used them twice in ?24 and once in ?25 to overrule the majority Council decisions. I expect my political leaders to actively support democracy in a world that is rapidly becoming more complicated. We have to be able to trust our leaders to make transparent decisions to the benefit of the whole community. We have to be able to trust our leaders to be the guardians of our collective future. We have to be able to trust our leaders to have open and inclusive discussions on those decisions to ensure they reached a considered and meaningful conclusion for the greater good.

?I don't see that in the use of a veto which delays development of much-needed support for people who are struggling in the community.?

A final word in support of overriding the veto came from another long-time resident, Sally Haberer, who said she has been an Aurora voter since 1969.

?I will keep my comments brief because most of them will be shouted down,? said Haberer, referring to previous examples of heckling from the crowd. ?The National Housing Strategy which received Royal Assent in 2019 states that all people have the right to live somewhere in security, peace and dignity according to the United Nations. It requires the government to implement reasonable policies and programs to ensure the right to housing for all within the shortest possible time frame. It also means that priority must be given to vulnerable groups and those in greatest need of housing.

?One last thought? to leave you with is that a large percentage of the homeless are people with special needs. Many of you on Council, and you, Mr. Mayor, know that our daughter is among this group. She has a good job and gets some government support, but many of her friends are young men who can't get a job. The daily worry for their parents is what will happen after the parents die. They could never afford Market Rent, group homes are limited and limiting. Even the shaggiest, illegal basement apartment is unaffordable. The wait list for subsidized housing is 10 ? 15 years. They should not have to leave their hometown to seek shelter or to die at the GO station where one young man recently died in the bitter cold of January. That is where he slept. He had lived in an encampment near the railroad tracks behind Aurora Co-Op, but one day he went out and his whole encampment ? his tent was taken and cleared away. This should not be happening in one of the richest towns in Canada.?

By Brock Weir