

Veto meeting sparks debate on democracy in Aurora

Mayor Tom Mrakas' veto on the future of a men's transitional and emergency housing built proposed for south Aurora stands after a raucous Council meeting last week.

A special meeting was called March 18 by Ward 1 Councillor Ron Weese, Ward 2 Councillor Rachel Gilliland, Ward 3 Councillor Wendy Gaertner, and Ward 5 Councillor John Gallo to override Mayor Mrakas' veto of a Council decision to invite the Region of York to re-file their zoning bylaw amendment application for the facility which would have been located on Yonge Street, just south of Industrial Parkway.

The proposal has been the subject of fierce debate and saw more than 300 members of the public fill Council Chambers for the meeting.

Among the attendees were members of Aurora Cares ? Housing For All, a grassroots organization that has been fighting for the residence, and another organization calling themselves Aurora United, many of whom wore red and wielded red-and-white signs reading, ?Our Mayor, Our Voice,? who were in favour of keeping the Mayor's veto on the books.

The proposal has also been the subject of fierce debate on social media and within these pages, since the zoning application formally came before Council in 2024.

Councillors on both sides of the issue began the meeting cautioning members of the public ? and each other ? to maintain decorum.

?We ask that you do not make any detrimental, offensive, or insulting comments or speak ill or malign the integrity of staff, the public, Council, or members of Committee, or any other external agencies,? said Ward 4 Councillor Michael Thompson, referencing the Municipal Code of Conduct.

?I would also remind everyone, as I am sure you're going to do it as well, Mr. Mayor, they (delegates) should be speaking on the agenda item and nothing more,? added Councillor Gallo, addressing Mayor Mrakas. ?I am sure you will stop them if they sway in any direction outside of that.?

The Mayor said he agreed, noting: ?We are here tonight to discuss the veto and whether the veto is upheld or whether it is overturned, we are not discussing any other matters and I will be holding Council to [those] same discussion points.?

The caution to Council members was largely unneeded ? with one exception.

After Councillor Gallo spoke to his original motion, which was the subject to the veto, Mayor Mrakas abruptly called for a vote, which did not allow other members of Council to speak to the business at hand.

Councillor Gallo nevertheless had the chance to express his concerns.

He began by speaking on Strong Mayor powers, which were given by Premier Ford to the Heads of Council of more than 40 municipalities and empower these Heads with a veto authority if a Council decision does not align with Provincial priorities, such as Housing.

As the proposed transitional and emergency housing building would create housing units in the community, the Councillor said the veto was misused.

?The Province established Strong Mayor powers to achieve two main goals ? first to build 1.5 million homes by 2031 and second to construct and maintain the necessary infrastructure to support this housing. These goals are critical for Ontario's housing future and

we all agree that addressing the housing crisis is an important priority. The motion that was vetoed was in direct alignment of those goals,? he said. ?The intent of Strong Mayor powers was never to allow Mayors to override decisions made by elected municipal councillors that align with those goals. These powers were meant to facilitate progress towards provincial housing objectives, not to stop them.?

He went on to cite the Mayor's ?commitment? in the last election campaign not to not use Strong Mayor powers should they be handed to Aurora in the future.

?The Mayor has overruled the will of the majority and duly elected representatives of Aurora,? he continued. ?This is a dangerous precedent we cannot allow to stand. Let me be clear, there is no other established democracy in the world that I am aware of where laws can be passed or decisions made by a minority of elected officials. The Mayor's veto in this case bypasses the decisions of the majority of Council. This is an affront to democratic principles and a direct violation of the system of governments we hold dear. When we allow one individual to exercise unchecked authority in this way, we risk undermining the entire fabric of our democratic system.?

Gallo was interrupted by Mayor Mrakas on a Question of Privilege, when the Councillor described what transpired as a ?blatant abuse of power,? a phrase which Mayor Mrakas strongly objected to. The Mayor asked for an apology after confirming with the Town Solicitor that the veto is allowed through the legislation.

Gallo concluded his remarks after offering an apology, emphasising the word ?blatant? while doing so.

?I have been part of many passionate debates and differences of opinion, but we have always respected the process, respected the will of the majority and work together for the benefit of the community. The Mayor argues the proposed use of the property?for a men's emergency and transitional shelter could compromise the strategic purpose and interfere with the delivery of infrastructure needed to support housing. However, the 2019 York Region Report, which the Mayor is using to justify his veto, contains one single sentence, stating, ?the acquisition of the subject lands will also make it available for any future capacity needs for the Henderson SPS.' The Mayor is misrepresenting this language. Nowhere in this report does it explicitly state that this land must be reserved exclusively for future infrastructure. The report does not support the Mayor's interpretation. In fact, a spokesperson for York Region has clarified recently that the new sewage pumping station would alleviate the capacity constraints, allowing for an additional capacity of 4,500 people supporting both current and future servicing needs for growth in Aurora. This clearly indicates there is no infrastructure concern preventing the proposed shelter for being built on the land. The Mayor's interpretation seems to be a personal opinion rather than a reflection of the official regional planning guidelines.

?We must not allow the Mayor's personal opinion or his interpretation of a single sentence from a Regional Report to block a project that serves the greater good of our community. We must respect the will of the majority of Council who made this decision after careful consideration and we must resist the use of Strong Mayor's powers override decisions of Council. The use of Strong Mayor powers in this instance represents a dangerous and undemocratic approach to governance. It disregards the will of this Council, disrespects the principles of democracy, and ignores the need of our most vulnerable residents. We cannot allow this to continue. I urge my fellow Councillors to stand up for the principles of democracy and local governments. Let us ensure that decisions are made by the majority and not by one individual wielding unchecked power.?

By Brock Weir