

?We have had enough!?! Residents opposed to emergency housing plan speak out at Council

A motion to invite the Region of York back to the table to re-apply for an emergency and transitional housing facility for men in Aurora's south end brought community opposition to Council Chambers last week.

Five community members took to the podium on February 25 to express their opposition to a motion brought forward by Ward 5 Councillor John Gallo which would have revived formal discussions around 55-bed proposal voted down by local lawmakers last year.

While Councillor Gallo made the motion following a lack of action in finding alternative sites for the build, residents expressed frustration that Council had not yet turned the page at the plan.

?After years of extensive public debate, thorough resident feedback regarding the suitability of this site, and a democratic vote rejecting this proposal in February 2024, I find it concerning that this motion is now being introduced without consulting the very residents it impacts,? said Rosie Mandla.

?You once stated, Councillor Gallo, and quite passionately, I might add, ?I have said this to anyone who has contacted me on both sides that my overwhelming issue is the sewage station and I have repeated this over and over that nothing would be built there. You wouldn't put a Belinda's Place there. It would have been a non-starter. You wouldn't put a youth centre there, it would be a non-starter?.'

?Here we are one year later and you have a change of heart without presenting any relevant new information. I respectfully point out that suggesting these men face a stark choice between the cold and a bad location is misleading. There are other options. I also question how much has been done to advance genuine alternatives like repurposing existing buildings before bringing this motion forward. From my perspective, this motion appears to be little more than political posturing.?

The matter, she concluded, ?only creates division,? and this was reflected in the delegation of Mike Zelyony who said he ?really struggled? with what he wanted to say to lawmakers.

?I want to lead with understanding. I want to lead with the fact that every single person in this room is struggling with something: relationships, finances, some know someone who is homeless ? serious, serious issues. I think we have an opportunity here where we can work together and find a location that makes sense, that will get approved, and that will be the right location for the people that will be living there,? he said, adding the community near the proposed site ?has been put through a lot.?

?It's enough. We've had enough. It's gone through a democratic process and it failed. They are not bringing this back. Let's work together and find a proper location. Councillor Gallo, I urge you to withdraw your motion?. Stop playing around with this community. We've had enough.?

Resident Zhiying Huang had similar concerns about location, stating it was ?not about placing buildings on a map, it's about people, sustainability, and responsible decision-making.?

?The site is isolated, surrounded by a woodland, and a pump station with no nearby public space or community hub, which provide the vulnerable individual a chance to connect with the society as well as rebuild a sense of belonging,? she said. ?If you truly care about vulnerable individuals, we should place them in a location where they have a real chance to renew their life, not in an unsafe, isolated, inaccessible area. If you truly respect the community, we should listen to the residents to work together to find a better solution rather than insisting? on a site that has already been rejected. If you truly believe in sustainability, we must make thoughtful, responsible decisions, one that our future generations can look back on with pride.?

Resident Harbinder Thandi said the motion in question 'seems to be a very crafty way of playing chess,' wondering whether the motion was really about a shelter.

'Councillor John Gallo, we listened to your voice. You inspired a lot of us, actually. You actually made some of the most valid comments towards York Region about the reason why you're voting against the shelter. We talked about non-optimal locations the last time we were here. We talked about a variety of things ' how between the sewage pumping station and the railway track, it's not where we should put our most vulnerable but I can't help but feel [this has] anything to do with the shelter or its location. It seems like there's people that have more political aspirations and that is the reason why we're here today.

'We all know it is a non-optimal location. We know that this is not the place where York Region has an appetite to bring this back and I don't understand why you're playing with the emotions of members of the public, members of Aurora, and especially all the other Councillors. We have to be here tonight to speak to you about this again and again and I hope this is the last time.'

A final voice against the motion came from resident Roy Cohen who agreed the community had issues with 'safety and property values,' including kids riding their bikes on a trail slated to be built nearby the proposed site.

'What we need to do is come together as a community, as a unit, to find the right solution. There should be some sort of inter-municipal collaboration where we're speaking to all the other municipalities and working towards finding a greater solution and we can do it, but we need to do it properly. It's not fair for one ward, one group of residents, that don't want it in their ward. Call them whatever you want, say whatever you want, they just don't want it. You were elected by us and you have a fiduciary duty to ensure we're in a good place.'

By Brock Weir