

Region looks to its own properties for housing solutions following Mayor's motion

The Region of York will soon undertake a review of Regionally-owned lands that could be repurposed to address municipal priorities, including housing.

The move came following a motion from Mayor Tom Mrakas, Aurora's lone voice at the Regional table, to look at new ways to address the housing crisis.

Mayor Mrakas gave notice for his motion in March and it subsequently came before Regional lawmakers in April.

The motion Regional Council ultimately passed, however, was slightly watered down compared to what Mayor Mrakas initially put forward. The original motion called for Regional staff to be directed to undertake a review of Regionally-owned buildings for the purposes of identifying those that are under and/or unused and provide an analysis of those that can be potentially repurposed for other regional priorities, including supportive housing.

By the end of the meeting's lengthy discussion, including supportive housing was nixed from the final wording, stopping simply at regional priorities.

York Region has recently adopted a true hybrid work policy where 60 per cent of the staff will work only 50% of their work week on site, said Mayor Mrakas in the motion. Regional office buildings, including the 422,000 square foot Regional Head Office on Yonge Street will now, as a consequence, have sizeable areas of under and unused taxpayer funded office space available for other purposes.

Continuing at the table, he said going forward with the review would be a good exercise for the Region.

I don't think every single one of us has a full understanding of how many properties the Region do own so I think it is a good exercise to have that understanding, as well as including parking lots and those types of properties that are within our municipalities, and ultimately looking at how they will be utilized right now.

Some methods, he added, could include repurposing, selling and/or consolidation.

One argument for removing including supportive housing from the motion came from Newmarket Mayor John Taylor, who said the issue of supportive housing was a provincial matter. He suggested the words as they stood could open up a Pandora's box in misstating what kind of housing we're looking for.

Mayor Taylor, referencing Aurora Council's decision earlier this year to deny a men's transitional and emergency housing building in the Town's south end, questioned whether Mayor Mrakas' intent was to ensure any future uses fit seamlessly with the intent of a Town's Official Plan, a comment that harkened back to Mrakas' statement on the initial denial.

Absolutely, if we're looking at repurposing it for a housing perspective, but I think the value of us seeing all properties because, as I mentioned, it could be for the purpose of selling that property or consolidating, bringing people in and then leasing it whatever those options are, said Mayor Mrakas. It is not limited to a housing perspective, but the housing ones absolutely should fit within the Official Plan and the zoning requirements within each of the municipalities.

Replied Taylor: Your description suggests that the Regional head office and office buildings could be used for housing purposes, at least seems to suggest that. You have written online that you think they should be looked at for housing purposes, but they do not fit the zoning and Official Plan, just as the site in Aurora for emergency and transitional housing did not. Do you still think we should look at the offices and this building in Newmarket as they don't fit seamlessly into the Official Plan and zoning regulations?

Mayor Mrakas said he "didn't pretend to understand Newmarket's Official Plan" in a similar way he didn't expect other members of Regional Council to understand the ins and outs of Aurora's. Nevertheless, he said "things should fit within our OP" but there is a "flexibility" when it comes to repurposing.

Mayor Taylor continued that there's "no way" anyone could see the Regional Offices as "fitting seamlessly" for housing.

"I think I have a right to speak up on this because Newmarket is the site of two shelters, two transitional housing locations, and your suggestion here and in the media is that one [facility] that is not in Aurora should come here and be housed in Newmarket," he said. "I am asking, should your principle that it has to fit seamlessly into the intent of the OP and zoning regulations in Aurora should also apply in Newmarket.

"I will look at any building and change the zoning and the Official Plan or any piece of land and, in fact, I requested an MZO on Yonge Street to get the Inn from the Cold location and we have received that. It is not that I don't support it, it's just that to set that as a standard in one Town but then say look at everything everywhere else I think is confusing."

By Brock Weir
Editor
Local Journalism Initiative Reporter