
Subject: Considerations for New Homeless Shelter Site Selection

Report To: Public Health and Social Services Committee

Report date: Tuesday, June 11, 2024

Recommendations

1. That this report **BE RECEIVED** for information.

Key Facts

- The purpose of this report is to inform Council of the considerations to be used in the selection of sites for future emergency homeless shelters.
- The Region is currently seeking a permanent site in St. Catharines to replace the temporary shelter at Riordon Street and exploring sites for expansion or alternative shelter sites in Niagara Falls and Welland.
- The use of site selection considerations is intended to reduce the chance of “Not in My Backyard” (NIMBY) opposition to a shelter site by providing a process that is transparent, principle-based, and conforms to applicable legislation pertaining to land use and the human right to life, liberty and security of the person and the right not to be deprived thereof in accordance with the principles of fundamental justice (commonly referred to as right to housing life).
- Site considerations included in this report have been shared with local area municipalities and key community partners for their input.

Financial Considerations

There are no financial considerations associated with this information report.

Analysis

Emergency shelters are a form of short-term supportive housing that are a core part of a system of care for persons experiencing homelessness. An examination of shelter capacity in Niagara Region completed by OrgCode in 2023 recommended that Niagara Region replace the 95 seasonal beds in St. Catharines and Niagara Falls with permanent year-round beds. This was completed by early 2024 through the opening of shelter at Summer Street in Niagara Falls and the temporary site at Riordon in St. Catharines. The report also recommended to further increase the overall number of shelter beds over the next three years in order to respond to an expected increase in

homelessness due to the continued lack in affordable housing, the persistently low social assistance rates and the rising rates of unsheltered homelessness. It should be noted that it is well understood that housing, not shelter beds, is the solution to homelessness.

The specific number of additional shelter beds needed (or maintained) will depend on the amount of new bridge housing, permanent supportive housing, and affordable housing developed in the region. It is hoped that the future will see continued investment in affordable housing, and thus reducing the need for emergency shelters. Nonetheless, staff are currently facing the pressing need to select a permanent site in St. Catharines to replace the temporary site at Riordon.

Historically the shelter facilities in Niagara Region have been provided by partner agencies using assets they already owned. As such, there has not been a need to use criteria for site selection for these pre-existing assets. That said, there is much to be learned from the existing sites. Pre-existing assets operating as shelters have historically presented barriers to access, and challenges to operate due to: limits to privacy; use of communal settings for a wide range of people and needs; challenges accommodating couples; and safety and security of persons and belongings. Purpose built shelters can, by design, better serve community members experiencing homelessness by reducing barriers to access, enhancing dignity and safety, and support positive transitions to permanent housing. The shelter capacity review has identified that shelters are not economically viable unless they have at least 25 to 40 beds, and that keeping to less than 100 people at a shelter per night gets better engagement and service outcomes while allowing for economies of scale.

As the funding for homeless shelters are a municipal service manager responsibility (as directed and funded by the province), site selection for new shelters will be largely supported by the Region. Therefore, the proposed site selection considerations are intended to guide the selection of Region-funded shelter sites and are not intended to guide site selection by unfunded third-parties. However, site selection considerations need to make sense to local area municipalities and reflect their input, particularly larger communities where new purpose-built shelters are likely to be created. Site considerations should be transparent, principle-based, and conform to applicable legislation pertaining to land use and the human right to life, liberty and security of the person and the right not to be deprived thereof in accordance with the principles of fundamental justice. It is particularly important to avoid the practice or behaviour of 'people zoning' based on "Not in My Backyard" (NIMBY) attitudes and tactics.

Therefore, the use of site selection considerations can reduce the opportunity for NIMBY to factor into the selection process.

NIMBY is defined by the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation as protectionist attitudes and exclusionary/oppositional tactics used by community groups facing an unwelcome development in their neighbourhood. NIMBY opposition can often be directed at affordable housing projects, including short term supportive housing projects such as shelters. Typically, an announcement is made that a project is being proposed in a neighbourhood, and the community rallies in protest to prevent its development. Often the concerns raised by neighbours are based on assumptions the proposed project will increase crime, noise, theft and lower property values. While these are very real concerns, they are not strongly aligned with evidence.

Additionally, the Ontario Human Rights Commission has stated, that people do not have the right to choose their neighbours. And that discriminatory attitudes toward people experiencing homelessness, mental health and addictions disabilities, including fears that a shelter project may result in increased crime, lowered property values, and a possible threat to child safety, are not a legal basis upon which a municipality can make zoning or planning decisions.¹

A critical success factor for any shelter, like any good neighbour, is a commitment to positively engage with other neighbours through communication and a willingness to work together to address any legitimate issues in the neighbourhood. A suggested practice is to develop a community liaison committee that has members of the community included with service providers, municipal staff and people with lived experience.

Regional staff have undertaken a review of practices in other jurisdictions across Canada. Although it is common for municipalities to have selection criteria for community housing, there was limited evidence of shelter specific criteria. The considerations developed by staff are not intended to be rigid criteria by which a site either passes or fails. Instead, the considerations can provide an aggregate picture of the constraints and suitability among potential locations available for a new shelter.

¹ [Ontario Human Rights Commission](https://www.ohrc.on.ca/en/news_centre/proposed-emergency-and-transitional-housing-project)

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Included in the shelter site selection considerations are elements related to:

- Planning Act, land use, servicing and infrastructure, and site due diligence
- Things to include if possible, such as walkability and proximity to transit, amenities and services
- Things to avoid if possible, such as site-specific costs, overburdening a neighbourhood with too many services, and other risk factors

To be successful, shelter siting will need to be a cooperative process with local area municipalities. Region staff circulated the site selection considerations (Appendix A) to local area municipalities and community agencies that support people experiencing homelessness in Niagara for their input.

Alternatives Reviewed

Given the lack of best practice policies in Canada, for shelter site selection considerations, staff could simply work to select sites solely as permitted by local zoning. This approach, while supported in law, does risk greater neighbourhood tension when introducing new facilities, and ignore the very real struggles faced by local area municipalities who are seeking to support all residents in a very challenging housing and homelessness context. The shelter siting approach therefore includes considerations beyond those required by zoning.

Relationship to Council Strategic Priorities

This report supports the council priority of an Equitable Region by providing access to affordable and inclusive housing options.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 Draft Shelter Site Selection Considerations