



STAFF REPORT ACTION REQUIRED

Update on the Schoolhouse Shelter

Date:	October 31, 2012
To:	Community Development and Recreation Committee
From:	General Manager, Shelter, Support and Housing Administration
Wards:	27
Reference Number:	

SUMMARY

At its meeting of July 11, 2012, City Council approved a number of motions related to the proposed closure of the Schoolhouse shelter and possible future uses of funding and directed that staff report back to Community Development and Recreation Committee on November 14, 2012. This report responds to those motions and provides recommendations for continued use of the Schoolhouse building and the funding allocated for its operation.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The General Manager, Shelter, Support and Housing Administration, recommends that:

- 1) City Council direct that discussions regarding possible uses of the \$746,790 gross (\$135,908 net) currently used to fund the Schoolhouse shelter, including housing allowances, harm reduction housing and shelter harm reduction funding be included as part of the 2013 community consultations related to the implementation of the Community Homelessness Prevention Initiative (CHPI);
- 2) City Council authorize that pending upcoming CHPI community consultations the Schoolhouse site remain in operation as a low threshold emergency shelter site for single men, using harm reduction principles;
- 3) City Council direct that drinking of alcohol on site and user fees associated with the transitional shelter program be discontinued effective January 1, 2013;

- 4) City Council direct staff to negotiate with Dixon Hall to operate this new program model and, should these negotiations not be successful, to seek an alternative operator; and
- 5) City Council direct City staff in collaboration with Dixon Hall staff to continue to work with the remaining transitional shelter residents to access housing in the community.

Financial Impact

Funding for the operation of the Schoolhouse shelter of \$746,790 (gross) and \$135,908 (net) is included in the 2012 Approved Operating Budget for Shelter Support and Housing Administration.

The Deputy City Manager and Chief Financial Officer has reviewed this report and agrees with the financial impact information.

DECISION HISTORY

At its meeting of March 27, 2012 the Community Development and Recreation Committee passed a motion recommending that the General Manager, Shelter, Support and Housing Administration provide an update on the full history, current status and future plans for the Schoolhouse Shelter, a 55-bed transitional shelter for men.

<http://app.toronto.ca/tmmis/viewAgendaItemHistory.do?item=2012.CD11.6.pdf>

At its meeting of July 11, 2012 City Council considered a report on the current status and future plans for the Schoolhouse shelter. Council passed a number of motions concerning the closure of the Schoolhouse directing the General Manager, Shelter Support and Housing Administration to report back to committee on potential uses for the funding currently allocated to the Schoolhouse. It also directed consultations with key stakeholders be held in order to make improvements to current harm reduction services in the City.

<http://app.toronto.ca/tmmis/viewAgendaItemHistory.do?item=2012.CD14.1>

ISSUE BACKGROUND

The property at 349 George Street was built in 1886 and was previously used as a school. The former City of Toronto owned and operated the Schoolhouse program at this address since 1978. At the time of amalgamation Council considered the future of the Schoolhouse and, in March of 1999, approved some upgrades to the building and transferred operation of the Schoolhouse program to Dixon Hall.

In 2009 Dixon Hall, approached the City indicating that they wished to end their contract for operation of the Schoolhouse shelter. Based on discussions with Dixon Hall related to

the program model and the condition of the property, City staff made the decision to proceed with the closure of the program. A plan was put in place for the closure and staff and clients were advised in November 2011 that the program would be closed. Admissions were also suspended at that time.

In March 2012, staff were directed to provide an update to the Community Development and Recreation Committee on the full history, current status and future plans for the Schoolhouse shelter on June 27, 2012. A number of deputants appeared before committee at that time raising concerns about the loss of the facility, as it is one of only two shelters in the City that allows drinking on site. A number of motions were subsequently adopted by Council directing the General Manager, Shelter, Support and Housing Administration to explore other uses of the funds allocated to the Schoolhouse, including for housing allowances and for harm reduction programming in other parts of the shelter system and to consult with the community regarding models of harm reduction housing.

COMMENTS

Current Status

When admissions were suspended in November of 2011, there were 55 men in the Schoolhouse program. Since that time, 40 men have left the program. Nineteen of these men have moved into housing, one has gone to hospital, and the remaining 20 have failed to return to the program or have gone to another shelter. The occupancy of the facility is now 15 men. Dixon Hall continues to work with the remaining residents to provide appropriate housing in the community.

Emerging Occupancy Trends

When Dixon Hall first notified Hostel Services in 2009 of their intent to terminate their contract with the City for services at the Schoolhouse, staff reviewed occupancy numbers in the men's shelter system and concluded that closing the program would have only a minor impact. As it was a transitional program and there was very little turnover, the system did not rely on the Schoolhouse to provide space for emergency referrals

Since that time there has been an increase in demand in the men's emergency system and the Assessment and Referral Centre is being well used by men seeking shelter who may sometimes have to wait for an extended period to access an available bed. As there is also generally an increase in demand for shelter beds for single adults during the winter months staff believe that the addition of a small number of emergency beds for single men would assist in meeting demand.

Therefore, it is recommended that the Schoolhouse continue to operate, but as an emergency shelter for single men. This will provide some flexibility in the system.

New Model of Service

While staff are recommending that the site remain open, a change is proposed in the model of service at the Schoolhouse that will better meet the City's service requirements at the present time. It is proposed that the new emergency model would operate using harm reduction principles but would not allow drinking of alcohol on site.

This change would mean that, as with the rest of the shelter system, admissions will not be refused due to substance use alone and that clients who are under the influence of substances would be admitted if their behaviour did not represent an immediate health and safety issue. Additionally individual support services will be available through a harm reduction worker as well as programs/workshops on safe consumption and reducing use. The program will offer a safe bottle storage program and regular nursing services will be provided.

The current practice of charging a user fee will be eliminated as user fees are not charged at other emergency shelter sites. At this time the program will continue to be an overnight program, however staff will review whether hours can be extended during the day. Dixon Hall will continue to work with the 15 clients currently staying at the site to assist them in finding housing in the community.

Some minor building changes may be required to allow this use in the short term. In order to allow for dining and program space and to free up funding for harm reduction programming, it is proposed that the occupancy of the program be reduced from 55 to 40 beds. This will free up space in the building for a dining area and programming space. Staff aim to address repair and maintenance issues including plumbing and painting out of existing capital budgets.

Hostel Services have had initial discussions with the current service provider Dixon Hall as to whether they have an interest in operating the site under this new model. If staff are unable to successfully negotiate an agreement with Dixon Hall the City would seek a new operator for the site.

Community Consultations and CHPI

Motions adopted at the July 11, 2012 City Council meeting relating to the Schoolhouse directed staff to assess how the funding for the Schoolhouse could be used to create housing allowances and supports for clients. Council also directed that consultations be held with the community and key stakeholders on new models of transitional housing that would support Toronto's shelter and housing objectives.

On October 14, 2012, the Deputy City Manager presented a report to Executive Committee outlining the upcoming changes to the provincial funding for homeless Services through the new Community Homelessness Prevention Initiative (CHPI). The report seeks approval for the General Manager, Shelter, Support and Housing Administration, to:

- Develop a consultative engagement strategy to solicit input from clients and community stakeholders on priorities and best approaches to services that capitalize on the flexibility offered by the CHPI program; and
- Report back to Council in 2013 on the long term strategic plan and implications for program implementation starting in 2014.

The report notes that during 2013, a strategic plan will be developed to identify the long term vision for the homeless service system and the short term implementation steps and change management approaches required to achieve that transformation. This strategic plan will include broad ranging engagement of communities and stakeholders, including service users, service providers, landlords, business associations, and other institutions and governments. These consultations will allow all stakeholders to provide feedback on proposed program and service delivery options.

Much of the information regarding this new program did not become available until after the July meeting of Council and so was not considered at that time. Given that the City is about to embark on a consultation regarding shelter and homelessness services generally, there is an opportunity to consider the Schoolhouse Shelter program and its funding in that framework. Therefore it is recommended that discussions regarding harm reduction housing, harm reduction in shelter services, and replacement of shelter funding with housing allowances be part of these larger CHPI discussions and consultations. Further, this site still be specifically considered as part of the Seaton House redevelopment in relation to the on-going need for transitional housing

Conclusion

The occupancy at the Schoolhouse shelter currently sits at 15 men. The current operator of the facility, Dixon Hall, is continuing to work with them to obtain housing in the community. Given the increase in demand in the single men's sector that was not present when the decision was made to close the shelter, Hostel Services is recommending the Schoolhouse remain open as an emergency men's shelter. The long term future of the Schoolhouse, the reallocation of funding within the shelter system, and for harm reduction services should be addressed as part of the consultations on the new provincial funding model.

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