



STAFF REPORT ACTION REQUIRED

Strategies to Improve Locating and Relocating Emergency Shelters

Date:	April 1, 2015
To:	Community Development and Recreation Committee
From:	General Manager, Shelter, Support and Housing Administration
Wards:	All
Reference Number:	

SUMMARY

This report comments on issues highlighted by members of Community Development and Recreation Committee (CDRC) relating to the challenges of locating properties for use as emergency shelter and community engagement best practices when opening emergency shelters.

RECOMMENDATIONS

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

1. Community Development and Recreation Committee receive this report for information.

Financial Impact

This report has no financial implications beyond the approved 2015 Operating Budget.

Equity Impact

The effective operation and capacity of the emergency shelter system directly impact access to emergency and support services by vulnerable residents of Toronto, including equity seeking groups. The ability of the City to locate shelters in an efficient and sensitive manner contributes to this outcome.

DECISION HISTORY

At its meeting of March 23, 2015 Community Development and Recreation Committee recommended adoption of CD2.2, *Infrastructure and Service Improvement Plan for the Emergency Shelter System*. The committee also requested the General Manager, Shelter, Support and Housing Administration, to report to the Community Development and Recreation Committee on strategies to improve the ability of the City to locate and relocate shelters in an efficient and community sensitive way and to update Community Engagement Best Practices for Emergency Shelters to include clear timelines.
<http://app.toronto.ca/tmmis/viewAgendaItemHistory.do?item=2015.CD2.2>

ISSUE BACKGROUND

The staff report, *Infrastructure and Service Improvement Plan for the Emergency Shelter System* (CD2.2) identified the need, in the next few years, to find up to 15 locations to accommodate new shelter capacity to achieve a 90% occupancy target in each emergency shelter sector, and also to respond to the need to relocate several existing shelter sites, including those related to the George Street Revitalization project. The report also described the process to create new shelters and outlined community engagement best practices regarding the development of emergency shelters.

During debate of these components of the staff report CDRC members highlighted the following issues:

- the importance of trying to maintain services at existing locations;
- the importance of improving the transparency of decision processes when the relocation of shelter services is necessary; and
- the challenges encountered in securing new locations for shelters.

This report comments on each of these issues raised. CD2.2 also included an attachment outlining "Community Engagement Best Practices for Emergency Shelters." With the benefit of the debate and points raised at the March meeting of CDRC, staff have reviewed the best practices; an updated outline of best practices is appended to this report as Attachment 1.

COMMENTS

Maintaining Existing Service Locations

The City's objective should be to protect services in their current location wherever possible. An exception would be a situation when a location is clearly unsuitable or changing demand results in a service no longer being needed. In the latter instance, consideration should still be given to alternative services that would continue use of the location for a social purpose.

As soon as staff become aware that a service location is at risk, for example due to a leased building being sold or an agency deciding to sell the property where the service is located, staff will immediately engage the Ward Councillor where the service is currently located. The intent is for staff and the Ward Councillor to work with the agency, local community and current or new property owner (where applicable) to develop options to maintain the service in its current location.

As demonstrated by recent experience with the Red Door Family Shelter, the longer the lead time, the better the chance of a successful outcome. A current challenge is that, sometimes, staff learn about the need for service relocation after a property sale has occurred or with relatively short notice. Currently, language in existing Operating Agreements with purchase of service shelter providers requires that they provide 90 days notice to the City when planning to cease operating an existing service for any reason. Although many agencies do provide more notice, this is all that is currently required. Staff will work with Legal Division on options to require more notice of potential service relocation by, for example, amending Operating Agreements, issuing a new service directive or including additional language in the Shelter Standards, in order to ensure that agencies provide staff with as much notice as possible, so that staff can in turn provide the Ward Councillor with notice as far in advance as possible. In principle, as soon as an agency becomes aware that a property sale is being contemplated, they should advise the City.

Improving Transparency in Relocating Shelter Services

If maintaining a shelter in its current location is not possible and the facility needs to move, the priority should always be to relocate the service within the same neighbourhood, or as close as possible to take advantage of community familiarity with the service and proximity to existing support networks. Given the real estate market, this is not always possible. If the location identified for possible relocation is in a different ward, as soon as staff are aware that a potential location is available for consideration, staff will engage the Ward Councillor. The intent is for staff and the Ward Councillor to work with the agency and local community to facilitate successful integration of the service into its new location. In some cases, human resource or real estate transaction implications may prevent public discussion of the location of the shelter from occurring immediately.

As outlined in Attachment 1, best practice would be to provide notice to the Ward Councillor 6 months in advance of a new shelter location opening. However, a definitive timeline can't be provided because every situation is different, and in some cases staff may not have that much notice. This may be because the agency did not provide more than 90 days notice that a service needed to be relocated. It could also be that, where it was known that a service needed to be relocated, the search for a suitable replacement site has been underway for some time, confidentially, and a site in a different ward has been identified where the new service needs to open quickly in order to ensure enough shelter beds are available to those in need.

Once a potential site has been identified for shelter services, staff conduct an assessment of its suitability. The assessment includes size and configuration of the facility, zoning, accessibility, proximity to public transit, and neighbourhood amenities and services. More detail on assessment criteria is outlined in Attachment 1. The objective is always to locate shelters in neighbourhoods with services to support clients nearby.

Once the site has been identified, the Ward Councillor has been engaged, and the site has been assessed as suitable, best practice is to engage with the local community to inform them about the intended use of the site and the nature of the service, introduce the service provider, discuss concerns and opportunities, and identify mechanisms to facilitate the successful integration of the service into the neighbourhood.

Toronto's Housing Charter, as approved by City Council in 2009, states that all residents have the right to equal treatment in housing without discrimination as provided by the Ontario Human Rights Code, and to be protected from discriminatory practices which limit their housing opportunities. Consistent with these principles, the Shelter By-law provides that emergency shelters are a permitted use in all areas of the city, if the location:

- complies with all existing applicable zoning provisions;
- is on a major arterial road or minor arterial road;
- is located is at least 250 metres from any other lot with a municipal shelter or emergency shelter, hostel or crisis care facility; and
- has been approved by City Council.

While neighbours do not have the right to approve or deny the use of a property as a shelter, timely and transparent public engagement is key to addressing concerns, diffusing incorrect assumptions, building positive relationships between the community and the shelter provider, and fostering community support for these services. Initial outreach to the neighbouring community, in the form of correspondence and a public meeting, should happen as soon as possible in the relocation process.

Challenges in Securing New Shelter Locations

As discussed at the March meeting of CDRC, up to 15 new shelter locations will be needed in the next several years. Locating and securing appropriate properties for these shelter locations will be a significant challenge, given the current competitive real estate market. In particular, the challenges in locating and securing appropriate sites include:

- The ability to move quickly to secure sites competitively, while seeking appropriate Council approvals.
- The capacity to commit funds to secure sites conditionally by providing a deposit, particularly for locations that will be operated by third party purchase of service agencies.

- The availability of resources to fund renovations and retrofits to convert properties from their previous use to shelter use. Where there is a conversion cost of an identified property, if the agency takes on debt to do the required renovations, this increases the operating costs of the service in the long run as operating funds are required to make payments on that debt.

Even in circumstances where the service may be able to continue in its current location through agreement with a developer, temporary space will be needed for relocation while construction is underway. This temporary space may be needed for one or more years. The same process needs to be followed for both temporary and permanent locations. In some cases, it may be worthwhile for the City to consider an upfront investment in purchasing a site to secure its ongoing use as a community service, rather than invest funds to renovate a leased facility.

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ATTACHMENT

1. Community Engagement Best Practices for Emergency Shelters

ATTACHMENT 1

Community Engagement Best Practices for Emergency Shelters

The following best practices for community engagement when opening emergency shelters were developed based on previous experience in Toronto and a jurisdictional review.

Identification of Proposed Site

- Identify site and complete due diligence process to assess suitability. Assessment of suitability to include:
 - Planning and zoning considerations
 - Size and suitability of facility
 - Available facility amenities such as washrooms, common areas, parking, outdoor space, including appropriate smoking spaces that are respectful of both clients and neighbours
 - AODA (elevators, stairs, barrier free access, hallway and door sizes, accessible washrooms)
 - Cost of renovations required to occupy building
 - Located on an arterial road
 - Proximity to accessible public transit
 - Distance to nearest other emergency shelter
 - Neighbourhood amenities including drop-ins, food programs, public libraries, recreation centres, health facilities, mental health and addictions supports, employment centres, income support offices, local businesses, etc.
- Not all facilities will meet all of the criteria outlined above, particularly given the competitive nature of the real estate market. The above list represents factors staff should take into consideration, not requirements, when assessing suitability of a site.

Notification of Ward Councillor

- Engage with the Ward Councillor as soon as staff become aware that the site has been identified for possible use as an emergency shelter to inform them of the potential use, the assessment of its suitability and to develop strategies for communication with the neighbouring community.
- Best practice, where possible, is to provide at least 6 months notice to the Ward Councillor in advance of a shelter opening. Given the fast pace of the real estate market and the need to ensure adequate shelter capacity is available to those in crisis, this may not always be possible, but the objective will always be to provide as much notice as possible within the specific circumstances.

- If the site is within 250 metres of another Ward, notify that Councillor as well.

Holding a Public Information Meeting

- Staff will support the Ward Councillor to schedule an evening public information meeting to inform the local community regarding the use of site as an emergency shelter prior to approval of the site by Council.
- Staff will prepare a written communication to be circulated to local residents and businesses within 250 meters informing them of the intended use of the site and identify the date, time, location of the public information meeting. Provide at least two weeks notice of the meeting, wherever possible.
- The meeting should be held as close to the site as possible. The local councilor or BIA could assist in finding a location, e.g. restaurant, school, place of worship, community centre, etc.
- The Councillor or a member of their staff should attend the meeting to hear from their constituents, ask questions, and collect information needed to guide their subsequent decision-making.
- Where possible, consider choosing a third party facilitator who is neutral and respected in the neighborhood, with experience facilitating large groups on contentious issues. The facilitator could be a paid professional or a respected local leader (such as a faith leader, school principal or the executive director of a local community centre).

Format of the Public Information Meeting

- The purpose of the public information meeting is to provide information and allow residents to express their concerns and ask questions in a respectful atmosphere.
- At the public information meeting, staff and a representative from the agency will provide:
 - Description of the agency, its services and how it plans to use the site and fit into the neighbourhood
 - Further details on the project described in written communication
 - Overview of the approvals process and next steps
 - The date of the Community Development and Recreation Committee meeting at which the proposed use of site will be considered
 - Information on how deputations can be made before the Community Development and Recreation Committee
 - The date of the Council meeting at which the proposed use of the site will be considered

- Options for the meeting can include:
 - Tours of the site
 - Booths inviting opportunities for one-on-one conversations with shelter providers, city staff, the police, community agencies, etc.
 - Small discussion groups
 - Information displays
 - Opportunities for written comments
- Other recommended approaches include:
 - Greeters to welcome people at the door and explain what is happening
 - Sign-in sheet to collect e-mail addresses or other contact information for follow-up information
 - Short, informal presentations only, with most of the available time allotted for discussion and answering questions
 - A note taker present to record comments for review by staff after the meeting
 - Follow-up communication summarizing feedback, recapping information provided in response to questions and summarizing next steps in the approval process

Community Liaison Committee

- Names of residents interested in participating in an ongoing Community Liaison Committee may be solicited at the public information meeting.
- If the site is approved, staff will call together the Community Liaison Committee to provide further information to the local community, answer questions, and address any concerns. The Community Liaison Committee may also assist in identifying resources and services within the community to support the emergency shelter residents.