

# LILY CHENG

Councillor | Ward 18 Willowdale

   @lilychengto



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June 9, 2023

Dear Colleagues on Council,

I want to take a moment to reflect on the essence of our roles as city councillors and the responsibility we bear towards our constituents. Our journey as public servants should be guided by a commitment to strengthening democracy and ensuring that the voices of our residents are not only heard but valued. It is imperative that we recognize the significance of the path we take together in reaching decisions that shape the future of our Toronto.

I stand before you today as a city councillor who is deeply committed to strengthening democracy and ensuring the best outcomes for our residents in Toronto. We are faced with a pressing issue that requires our attention and a critical examination of our decision-making processes. You may have heard me say this on council, but I would like to say it here again - The journey is just as important as the destination. I firmly believe that the journey we share with our constituents towards significant community decisions is just as vital as the decisions themselves.

It is because of this commitment that I bring this issue to you today. The address of 175 Cummer Avenue holds significance to many due to the proposed Modular Supportive Housing complex on the shared green space between Cummer Lodge (Long Term Care housing 391 seniors) and Willowdale Manor (Toronto Seniors Housing Corporation - 256 seniors with low-incomes). It is important to address this matter, not to oppose the project, but to shed light on the flaws in our approach that have left certain voices marginalized and disregarded.

The consultations for this project were conducted solely online (with additional telephone access), necessitated by the challenges of the pandemic. While this online format was a reasonable response to the circumstances, it inadvertently excluded a significant portion of our senior population who lack access to or familiarity with virtual meetings. Furthermore, language barriers became apparent, as a majority of the 256 residents in the area do not have a strong command of English. Although translated materials were provided, the seniors were never granted an opportunity to be heard in person through translators. The absence of multilingual opportunities to be heard during the consultation process hindered the seniors' ability to fully participate and voice their concerns. Consequently, fear and anxiety have permeated the hearts of our seniors, leaving them feeling unheard and disempowered.

It is crucial that we do not dismiss their genuine concerns by labeling them as NIMBYs for voicing their apprehensions. Instead, we must approach this issue with empathy, understanding, and a genuine desire to listen and consider their perspective. It is not a matter of pitting one group of vulnerable individuals against another, but rather finding a balanced solution that addresses the needs of all.

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There are three significant gaps in our process that we must acknowledge and learn from:

1. Units ordered before zoning was firm.
2. Lack of accessible consultation.
3. Site plan designed without adequate consideration of the seniors.

## 1. Units ordered and stored

The decision to order the units before firm zoning regulations were in place led to uncertainties and complications during the planning phase. We did not get the requested MZO, but \$11 million dollars was received and spent to order the units which then sat in storage – first in a parking lot leased to the city by the TTC in Willowdale and later moved to indoor storage in Owen Sound at a cost of \$325.5K. Since they were moved in August, 2022 we have been paying \$71K per month to keep these units in storage. The rate recently increased to \$77K per month. When the MZO was not provided, council changed the zoning through a motion. However, this is currently under appeal at the OLT.

The case management date has been set for June 29, 2023 when a date will be set for the hearing. This could be as early as the end of this year, but could also happen some time next year. Currently, there is no Plan B for these units. Should the city lose at the OLT, we will have to scramble to figure out a new path which would extend the time we will need to pay for the storage of the units. We must ensure that our decisions are based on clear guidelines and thorough assessments to prevent unnecessary financial burdens and delays as well as an extended period of anxiety and uncertainty for those impacted by our decisions.

## 2. Lack of accessible consultation

The second flaw in our process was the absence of inclusive and accessible consultation methods. We failed to provide meaningful opportunities for the seniors residing at 175 Cummer Avenue to express their concerns effectively. Going forward, we must implement measures that cater to the diverse needs of our community, including multilingual support and alternative means of engagement. When making significant decisions we must always make every effort to hear and respond to the concerns of those most impacted by our decisions.

## 3. Site Plan designed without adequate consideration of the seniors

The third issue lies in the insufficient consideration given to the existing vulnerable seniors on the premises. Their voices should have been sought, valued, and integrated into the site plan. By ignoring their perspectives, we missed crucial opportunities to address their specific needs and alleviate their fears early in this process, including the importance of green space and the pressures the seniors and their visitors already face for parking.

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On April 24, 2023 my team and I hosted the first ever multilingual listening session attended by the Housing Secretariat and her staff. The Housing secretariat drew three conclusions from that session:

1. The green space holds immense importance to the seniors. They sit outside and look at the trees. Some use the green space when family visits on weekends. Others practice Tai-Chi outside during the spring and summer as weather allows.
2. The seniors are concerned about their safety. An incident occurred while we were at the listening session and it took 1.5 hours for security to arrive. This incident highlighted the need for enhanced security and timely responses to incidents.
3. The seniors expressed unease about the unknown impact on their current way of life.

I am deeply committed to achieving a positive outcome for both the seniors and the unhoused. I firmly believe that one need should not be pitted against another. To ensure the best outcomes, I have invested time in touring different supportive housing communities and engaging with various operators. I have learned that vilifying those who express concern or opposition is counterproductive. Instead, we should embark on a journey with them, fostering understanding and working towards a positive outcome that benefits everyone involved.

Allow me to share the heartfelt words of the senior residents at Willowdale Manor, translated from their native languages:

*"Because we are elderly, our world is our building and the green space in front. That is our entire world. In the back there is a parking lot and a sloped green space that is not accessible for us." - 82 years old female*

*"They should not be building on this green space. It's so close to us that there will be a loss of light. This building could affect our sense of safety and it will cause us to live with a sense of increased vulnerability." - 83 year old male*

*"Because most of the elderly live in this building alone with health issues such as heart problems, insomnia, and anxiety. We don't know what the impact will be of living with people struggling with mental health and addiction challenges in modular housing next to our building. I hope the government will have security for homeless people. At the same time, the safety of our elderly is guaranteed." - 80 years old female*

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*"Our hearts are not strong. In case something happens, what will happen to us? The placement of the modular supportive housing in the middle of the green space, means the new residents as well as us will all not have outdoor space to use. We know that they are vulnerable too. Do they also not need space to move around? We really need to add more parking spots here already. There are many people who live here and cannot find a parking spot." - 75 years old female*

These seniors are emotionally invested in this issue, and we must acknowledge their experiences. Many of them have come from countries with dictatorial regimes, and their perception of our democracy during this process has not been significantly different from their past.

I firmly believe that we can do better and must do better. The current configuration of the units will take away cherished green space from the seniors, prolonging their anxiety and uncertainty. Vincent Mak, the tenant representative for the seniors is 86 and has spent the past three years fighting tirelessly for their voices to be heard. He loses sleep over this on a regular basis.

We have two different pathways before us on council. The first option, preferred by the seniors, is to relocate the proposed supportive housing units to an alternative location in our ward. This choice would allow the seniors to continue enjoying the originally designated green space, which holds immense value to them. Research has shown that green spaces significantly benefit lower-income elderly populations, making it all the more vital to consider their needs in our decision-making. The same study concluded that there is a need to improve immediate outdoor green space near seniors' residences.<sup>1</sup> I do not think this was taken into consideration when we made the decision to take over the green space of the seniors.

The second option is a compromise that repositions the building to maximize the retention of accessible green space. This alternative also aligns the population served with seniors aged 59 and over, similar to the Cedarvale Supportive Housing site. Additionally, we propose conducting a feasibility study on an abstinence-only model, as highlighted by the Wellesley Institute, addressing a missing option in Toronto. Included in this second motion is a request for additional parking and lawn furniture for the seniors in a courtyard out front.

I understand the urgency of addressing our housing crisis, and I share the desire to implement these units promptly. However, considering the uncertain outcome of the Ontario Land Tribunal (OLT) hearings, it is wiser to relocate the units to ensure a guaranteed housing outcome rather than incur months of storage expenses without a clear resolution in sight.

<sup>1</sup> Levinger, P., Cerin, E., Milner, C., & Hill, K. D. (2021). "Older people and nature: the benefits of outdoors, parks and nature in light of COVID-19 and beyond—where to from here?" International Journal of Environmental Health Research, 1-8.

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It is important to note that a motion to build housing on the same site was previously denied by council in 1997, in defense of preserving the green space for the seniors. While concerns have been raised about setting a precedent, it is crucial to recognize that this location uniquely houses over 600 vulnerable seniors, making it an exceptional case that cannot be compared with any other site. We must strive to secure park spaces, particularly in high-growth neighbourhoods like Willowdale. The current green space is the most accessible parkland for the seniors in the area.

I am committed to finding an alternative location with the Housing Secretariat in my ward and working on the important community engagement journey that must happen in order to have the best outcomes - both for current residents and the future tenants of the modular supportive housing units. I am saying, "Yes, in my backyard," just not at the expense of the seniors.

Through our discussion, we have an opportunity to demonstrate our commitment to the 256 seniors at 175 Cummer Avenue by assuring them that their voices matter, we are actively listening, and we care. I hope you will consider supporting them in their pursuit of the best outcome.

Warm regards,



Lily Cheng

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