

ENCAMPMENTS INEVITABLE - PUBLIC SAFETY NOT CONSIDERED: SUSPEND THE SHELTER AT 629 ADELAIDE STREET WEST

To: Members of the City of Toronto's Economic and Community Development Committee
Re: Agenda Item 2024.EC13.8 - May 29, 2024

In light of the escalating and daily troubling reports concerning homelessness, addiction, the toxic drug crisis, the mental health crisis, inadequately managed safe-injection sites, shelters, and respite facilities, as well as failed harm reduction measures (including safe supply and diversion) and growing, unsafe encampments, which have become central to our community's public safety concerns, we urgently demand that the City of Toronto (city) take immediate and decisive action to suspend the unsafe siting of the 24-hour emergency shelter at 629 Adelaide Street West two blocks from Parkdale Queen West supervised-consumption site. This decision is reckless. It's clear to our community that the current lack of evidence-based planning, long-term project management, and decision-making for these facilities has exacerbated the tragic homelessness crisis for staff, clients, and neighbourhoods alike.

Background: Since September 2023, myself, along with hundreds of parents, residents, and businesses in the downtown west area of Toronto, have vehemently opposed the City of Toronto's plan to convert 629 Adelaide Street West into a 24-hour emergency shelter. Persistent public safety concerns particularly the proximity of the Parkdale Queen West supervised-consumption site to 629 Adelaide Street West minutes from two elementary schools in the heart of a neighbourhood — continue to worry our community in many ways.

And despite our persistent efforts to highlight critical public safety concerns to all levels of government, our voices are dismissed as irrelevant. Instead, senior city staff and politicians have accused us of fear-mongering, ambushing the October 24, 2023 Economic and Community Development Committee, unfairly stigmatizing homeless individuals, and even excluding and threatening local residents if we attend a recent critical community safety walk held by a private city-funded private engagement firm in our neighbourhood. Such dismissive responses to a pressing issue are unacceptable.

Our community strongly believes that the city and its funded service operator, intending to establish a shelter at 629 Adelaide Street West, due to a hastily-signed and very costly 10-year lease (a substantial windfall for the owner of this poorly maintained building) have ignored the potential public safety ramifications. However, the most alarming are the implications of locating this shelter near schools, existing service facilities, and, most notably the Parkdale Queen West supervised-consumption site.

A recent freedom of information (FOI) request reveals last-minute disagreements and confusion among senior city staff regarding even the facility's intended purpose and confirms our concerns and speculation that the siting of the facility was the result of staff confusion and mismanagement. Despite it being slated to open in December 2023, it remains empty.

This is a cautionary tale for all Toronto neighbourhoods. We are on public record advising of our concerns and we urge careful consideration of the implications we have outlined below.

Lack of transparency: Our initial efforts to engage with Councillor Malik (Ward 10) and city staff have been met with complete disregard. Instead of acknowledging our concerns, Councillor Malik and the city administration have evaded direct communication by referring residents to a city-funded third-party community engagement firm. This private firm, in turn, has simply informed us that the city's site selection process is final. When the city did briefly meet with us on several zoom meetings, despite our legitimate concerns regarding public safety, our input was casually dismissed without due consideration.

Disheartened by the lack of transparency, our community pursued an FOI request, unearthing hundreds of pages of city records. These documents reveal a convoluted web of decision-making and questionable financial management, involving directly and indirectly, 90 city staff, city-funded consultants, and the city-funded service operator — all for the establishment of just this one facility.

Shelter Siting: The proposed shelter location presents a unique and concerning situation. No other neighbourhood in Toronto contends with the convergence of a 24-hour emergency shelter, a supervised-consumption site, and numerous other social services within such close proximity to two elementary schools and a residential neighbourhood. This clustering raises serious public safety concerns. The track record of the city and its funded service operators in managing existing homeless facilities is already marred by documented incidents of violence, criminal activity, public drug use, drug dealing, assaults, encampments, fires, property damage, and death. Notably, these issues have been extensively documented at two other respite sites — 25 Augusta Avenue and 169 Liberty Street — both operated by the same city-funded service provider set to manage the proposed shelter at 629 Adelaide Street West.

Ignoring Public Safety Issues: Instances from other regions, such as the reconsideration or cancellation of various initiatives including drug decriminalization plans in British Columbia and Oregon, as well as Toronto Public Health's proposal and South Riverdale Community Health Centre's supervised-consumption site, and Toronto's supervised-consumption sites, underscore the importance of addressing community public safety concerns in policy decisions. The deadly drug dealer shootout in front of South Riverdale's safe-injection site, which tragically claimed the life of a mother, vividly illustrates the dire consequences of government decisions in ignoring public safety issues which has now led to a class action lawsuit being undertaken by the community.

Reported Violence in and Around Shelters: A recent Shelter Safety Study regarding violence and service restrictions by the Canadian Association for Mental Health (CAMH) has confirmed a disturbing trend: a 400% increase in violence and social disorder at shelters over the past decade — violence that spills out into neighbourhoods. Additionally, the implementation of new city procedures, Behavioural Risk Alert Safety System (BRASS), aimed at sharing and reporting serious and violent behaviour and threats that occur within and around shelters, further exacerbates our concerns. These developments underscore the pressing need for the city to halt the establishment of this 24-hour emergency shelter near Parkdale Queen West supervised-consumption site, seconds from one elementary school and minutes from another, in the heart of a residential area. Normalizing violence and drug use within our neighbourhoods is simply unacceptable.

Seniors and Shelters: Another recent and alarming report from the Canadian Medical Association, again, highlights the insufficiency of shelters (as currently managed and designed) in even meeting the health requirements of older adults grappling with homelessness. The stress of homelessness has led to individuals, as young as 50, to be categorized as seniors with 46% of shelters users 45 years of age and older — reported in the city's own 2021 Needs Assessment Report.

Resignation of Eileen de Villa, Toronto's Chief Medical Officer of Health: With the recent resignation of Eileen de Villa, the city must immediately refocus efforts on reforming strategies to break the cycle of addiction and support community public safety.

Lack of Supportive Housing: The city's decades-old struggle to establish sustainable affordable and supportive housing programs, as well as adequate treatment programs, remains deeply troubling. Instead of investing in long-term solutions, substantial funds are allocated to temporary shelters and respite sites, neglecting lasting support and underlying issues.

Dubious Use of City Resources: The city's lack of transparency and accountability regarding the multimillion-dollar lease agreement at 629 Adelaide Street West raises concerns about financial mismanagement. A multimillion-dollar 10-year lease was negotiated without clear funding commitments from the city, and as of summer 2023, the estimated cost, including operating expenses, exceeds \$40 million for just 50 beds—a cost that is likely to rise. This represents a substantial windfall for the owner of this very poorly maintained building who negotiated a \$300,000 four-month rental deposit. In fact, a letter obtained through the FOI request, authored by a senior city staff member, emphasizes that the city's operating budget must first receive approval from Toronto City Council before extending any financial commitments to the city-funded service operator. However, it appears the city approved the multimillion-dollar lease despite this requirement.

The hastily secured site (16,000 square feet), was described as a "nail-biter" negotiation by senior city staff, and was ultimately chosen due to the collapse of a previous lease agreement at another location (9,839 square feet). The abrupt withdrawal of the landlord, citing neighbourhood public safety concerns, forced the city into this rushed decision. Moreover, the current rundown building, now leased, falls egregiously short of meeting the city's own shelter design and technical standards. The absence of essential outdoor space and safety measures, in the heart of a neighbourhood, and in such close proximity to Parkdale Queen West supervised-consumption site, underscores the glaring oversight in the selection process for this shelter's location. It's evident that the process lacked the necessary scrutiny to ensure a safe and suitable environment for such a facility.

These short-sighted and costly decisions fail to offer sustainable solutions for those who are most vulnerable and in need. In fact, in May 2022, two audits by Toronto's Auditor General revealed, among other significant issues, that the cost of emergency shelters is over three times more expensive than providing supportive housing, and approximately seven to ten times more expensive than providing subsidized housing, rental subsidies, or housing allowances. The audits also critically revealed that shelter program monitoring and accountability needs significant improvement; metrics are not utilized to determine client success; and, regarding financial management, "with current annual emergency shelter costs of between \$80,000 and \$90,000 per person, [Toronto Shelter Support and Housing] should examine how it can operate more efficiently to reduce the cost of emergency shelters". 629 Adelaide Street is evidently just that — an inefficient use of city funding.

It has become very clear to our community that this hasty decision to situate this shelter in the heart of our neighbourhood lacks accountability and is devoid of evidence-based reasoning, neglecting everyone's public safety. Frustratingly, facilities of this nature would, of course, never even be considered for areas like Rosedale, Forest Hill, or Baby Point.

Relocation of Existing Service or New Program: The FOI has also revealed that the city-funded service operator, claiming to be relocating an existing service (a 24-hour respite site), was suddenly granted a self-described "new program" — a 24-hour emergency shelter with very different program standards including the critical component of case management already under scrutiny by Toronto's Auditor General in 2022. This "new program" did not allow for a city-led procurement process for other experienced service operators and most concerning — this operator has no previous experience managing an emergency shelter. When the community asked the city's privacy office for a copy of the operating agreement between the city and the city-funded service operator we were told one did not exist — yet the lease had been approved by the city.

Community Legal Challenge: Finally, the city's lack of transparency and accountability spurred our community to submit a \$200 city zoning-use review application to gain clarity on the applicable zoning by-laws for a shelter at this location. On January 5, 2024, the city responded stating that: "The proposed use of the Property is not a permitted use under the zoning for the Property". With our community repeatedly told our input and public safety concerns are irrelevant, we had no other choice but to undertake a legal challenge (funded by residents) against the city and the city-funded service operator. Though met with resistance, it has become a rallying cry for our community. Despite facing an uphill battle, we refuse to remain silent in the face of reckless decision-making that jeopardizes the safety and well-being of our neighbourhood.

Conclusion: As the city moves forward with its plans to establish another 20 homeless shelters in Toronto neighbourhoods in the coming years, our experience serves as a cautionary tale. The recent decision by Ottawa to reject the decriminalization of illegal drugs in Toronto, citing concerns about public safety, mirrors the apprehensions our community has expressed regarding the placement of this shelter near two elementary schools, adjacent to the Parkdale Queen West supervised-consumption site. Toronto neighbourhoods must demand increased accountability, transparency, and community involvement in the decision-making process. Anything less jeopardizes the safety and cohesion of our communities, particularly putting the most vulnerable at risk. City staff and elected officials must prioritize the interests of all residents and address concerns rather than casually dismissing them.

Diane Chester
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