

The Somali Centre for Culture and Recreation

Date: February 2, 2024

To: The Board of Directors of CreateTO

From: Chief Executive Officer

Wards: All

REASON FOR CONFIDENTIAL INFORMATION

This report deals with a proposed or pending acquisition or disposition of land by the City of Toronto.

SUMMARY

The Somali Centre for Culture and Recreation ("Somali Centre") is a registered non-profit organization led by a group of Somali Canadian young professionals from across Ontario aiming to create a dedicated cultural recreation and community space for the Somali population in Toronto. According to the organization, there has been a 40-year effort from the Somali community to develop a culture and recreation centre in Toronto to address the needs of this under-served community.

Beginning in the 1970s, the community began working with local leaders and politicians to advocate for this type of facility. The main goal of this centre is to create a "...central space for the Somali community to gather and receive culturally appropriate community services from non-profit service providers and agencies." After decades of advocacy, Toronto City Council adopted a motion in July 2022 to direct City of Toronto and CreateTO staff to work with the Somali Centre on a feasibility study to identify potential sites for this facility.

This report provides an outline of the collaborative process undertaken by CreateTO, the City of Toronto, and the Somali Centre and provides a staff review of their feasibility study. Next steps will include a continued effort to work together and to understand the operating model and long-term financial feasibility of the Somali Centre.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Chief Executive Officer, CreateTO, recommends that the Board of Directors of CreateTO:

1. Direct the Chief Executive Officer, CreateTO, in conjunction with the General Manager, Parks, Forestry and Recreation, the Executive Director, Social Development, Finance and Administration, the General Manager, Economic Development and Culture, and the Executive Director of Corporate Real Estate Management, to continue to work with the Somali Centre in a collaborative process; and, to report back once a viable site has been identified with details on site due diligence, the operational model, and the financial strategy.
2. Request City Council to consider a request to both the Provincial and Federal governments to provide financial support for this project in the form of capital and long-term operating funding;
3. Subject to the approval of Recommendation 4 by City Council, authorize the public release of Confidential Attachment 1 to this report following the closing of any transaction and at the discretion of the Chief Executive Officer, CreateTO; and,
4. Recommend to City Council to authorize the public release of Confidential Attachment 1 following the closing of any transaction and at the discretion of the Chief Executive Officer, CreateTO.

FINANCIAL IMPACT

There are no immediate additional financial impacts arising from the recommendations in this report. Resources required to support this project including the necessary due diligence work undertaken by CreateTO and the City are being allocated from the current staffing complement and are part of the 2024 Council Approved Budgets for CreateTO as well as partnering City Divisions.

DECISION HISTORY

On July 19, 2022, City Council directed the General Manager Parks, Forestry and Recreation, the Executive Director, Social Development, Finance and Administration, and the Chief Executive Officer, CreateTO to work with the Somali Centre for Culture and Recreation Steering Committee in Toronto and the impacted Councillors to explore potential partnerships for a new community cultural and recreation centre. This included supporting a feasibility study that would identify a location and funding opportunities for this centre.

<https://secure.toronto.ca/council/agenda-item.do?item=2022.MM47.29>

COMMENTS

Somali Centre for Culture and Recreation

The Somali Centre for Culture and Recreation ("Somali Centre") is a registered non-profit organization led by a group of Somali Canadian young professionals from across Ontario. Their goal is to create dedicated cultural recreation and community space for the Somali population in Toronto. According to the organization, there has been a 40-year effort from the Somali community to develop a culture and recreation centre in Toronto to address the needs of this community which has culminated in the creation of this organization.

According to 2021 Census data, Canada is home to over 65,555 people with Somali ancestry, making it one of the countries with the highest number of Somali diaspora. Based on the 2021 Census, the Toronto Somali community comprises of 19,810 people with a high concentration of the population in the west end of Toronto, including in Rexdale. The Somali community is part of the wider population of 265,005 Torontonians of African descent.

In 2017, the Social Development Finance and Administration division at the City of Toronto launched the first North American municipal Action Plan to Confront Anti-Black Racism. This report details the historically rooted anti-Black racism faced by populations of African descent in Toronto. Through this report, Torontonians of African descent reported that their neighbourhoods felt like a 'service desert' which implies a lack of community and social services that serve their area. Intersectional analysis is important in understanding the particular ways Somali Canadians are impacted by spaces, services and programming that lack cultural responsiveness. Somali residents also reported that even when services were available in their local community they are funded for all residents and are inadequate to meet the specific needs of Torontonians of African descent.

Community Engagement

Based on the information provided by the Somali Centre, the effort for a new community cultural and recreation centre goes back to the 1970s when the community worked with local leaders and politicians to advocate for this type of facility. The main goal of this centre is to create a "...central space for the Somali community to gather and receive culturally appropriate community services from non-profit service providers and agencies that offer services..." After decades of advocacy, City Council adopted a motion to direct City of Toronto and CreateTO staff to work with the Somali Centre on a feasibility study to identify potential sites for this facility.

To ensure the needs of the Somali community are included in the feasibility study, the Somali Centre embarked on a consultation process from February 2022 to October 2023. The Somali Centre focused their engagement efforts in several locations, including the West end, East end, North York and downtown in an effort to hear from the Somali community across Toronto.

According to the Somali Centre report, the consultation process resulted in the engagement of 6,481 members of the Somali community through a variety of methods including:

- Informant interviews;
- Survey questionnaires;
- Community events;
- Open houses;
- Focus groups with 32 targeted populations such as seniors, mothers and youth, and
- Workshops with 102 community leaders and stakeholders from relevant institutions, business, and service providers.

The Somali Centre reported that over 2,500 people completed the survey, 1,736 people attended community engagement events and 15,200 members of the public visited the Somali Centre's "Dhis Bulshada/Build Our Community" exhibit at Union Station during Nuit Blanche.

Vision for the Somali Centre for Culture and Recreation

The consultation process led by the Somali Centre focused on the needs of the Somali community concerning a potential community and cultural centre. Through this consultation, the community coalesced around six major themes:

- Location and accessibility;
- Functional programming and design;
- Preservation of culture and heritage;
- Culturally sensitive design and green infrastructure;
- Community and operational sustainability, and
- Supply of affordable housing.

Location and accessibility:

- 82% of the respondents identified a need for the Somali Centre to be located and built in either the Etobicoke or York areas of the City of Toronto.

Functional programming and design:

- 89% of participants requested a large indoor basketball court in addition to the majority of participants that identified a need for an outdoor basketball court.
- Over 85% suggested that multi-purpose recreational spaces were essential to the long-term sustainability of a Somali Centre.
- 83% of participants noted a need for fitness spaces.
- 82% of participants identified the need for wrap-around child and family amenities in the Somali Centre, including childcare, playgrounds and family rooms.
- Over 80% of the participants also identified the need for a community theatre/stage and flexible multipurpose space that can host community events.

- 59% of participants wanted to ensure that community mental health services were available on site.
- 57% of participants identified a need for the Somali Centre to include dedicated green spaces, community gardens and outdoor gathering spaces.
- 47% of participants requested a full-service swimming pool with family play areas to be included in a Somali Centre.

Preservation of culture and heritage:

- 91% of respondents wanted a library and archival space for Somali history, culture and tradition.
- 63% of participants identified a need for a public cultural exhibition space (e.g., museum, gallery) showcasing Somali culture, artifacts, history and artists.
- 59% of respondents want the provision of Somali language classes for both children and adults in the facility.

Culturally sensitive design and green infrastructure:

- Aesthetic appeal and presentability will be central to the design, and the centre should serve symbolically as an “aqal” (house) where Somalis can gather at a third space. Participants noted that prominent arches inspired by traditional Somali architecture should be integrated to create a welcoming ambiance.”
- Participants recommended that the Somali Centre should stand as a symbol of cultural pride and environmental responsibility. It should embody Somali and Canadian values and heritage while embracing a sustainable future.

Community and operational sustainability:

- Participants felt strongly that a Somali Centre should actively work to support Somali people who need help and provide spaces for settlement services for newcomers.
- Participants also discussed the importance of partnerships and durable funding models as vital for sustainability.

Supply of affordable housing:

- Participants recognized that the mandate of the Somali Centre is to build social infrastructure. However, they noted important opportunities to leverage partnerships with governments and developers to advance a long-standing need of the Somali community for affordable housing.

Site Review Process and Collaboration

Guided by Council direction, staff from CreateTO, Parks, Forestry and Recreation, Social Development Finance and Administration, and Economic Development and Culture began a process with the Somali Centre to better understand their request and work towards analyzing the feasibility of this idea. Based on these discussions with the Somali Centre, the most analogous type of facility tended to be a community recreation centre. CreateTO, in consultation with Parks, Forestry and Recreation, led a site search of all City-owned properties based on a combination of requirements from the Somali Centre and the typical site requirements of new community recreation centres.

CreateTO and City Staff, together with representatives of the Somali Centre used the following criteria as part of the location search:

- Location within Toronto near area with a higher proportion of residents identifying as Somali (based on 2021 Census data);
- Lot with sufficient size and configuration;
- Free from other City uses that would require relocation, and
- Limited infrastructure encumbrances.

Using a short list of sites, CreateTO and Parks, Forestry and Recreation staff worked collaboratively with the Somali Centre throughout 2023 to review potential locations for a future facility. The Somali Centre has procured planning and architectural consultants to complete a feasibility study to analyze these sites.

The planning consultants completed a review and test fit of the potential sites and provided recommendations on suitability based on factors such as:

- Physical fit of the indoor and outdoor programming for the Somali Centre;
- Compatibility with surrounding land uses, complexity of planning approvals required;
- Proximity to the Somali community and broader populations of African descent;
- Proximity to transit;
- Accessibility by walking and cycling;
- Potential to address gaps identified in Parks, Forestry and Recreation's Facilities Master Plan for Parks, and
- Potential for positive urban design impact.

The Somali Centre's architectural consultants have developed a functional building program and conceptual design based on the feedback from the community consultations. This functional building program and conceptual design outlines the indoor and outdoor layout and size of each of the rooms/components in the potential Somali Centre. Through this information, the Somali Centre was able to develop an order of magnitude cost estimate for the construction of this potential cultural and recreation centre.

Further information on the potential sites is in Confidential Attachment 1.

Operating Model and Funding Sources

The Somali Centre is working with a consultant to develop an operating model for the programming at this facility. This work will result in an operations plan that considers the long-term financial sustainability of the facility and includes detailed information on the programming, staffing, costs and potential funding sources. This City of Toronto is working with the Somali Centre on identifying a potential location and funding from the City is not available to cover any due diligence, development, construction or operating costs.

As the Somali Centre has worked with the City of Toronto and CreateTO on identifying a site for this facility, the organization plans to work with the Provincial and Federal levels of government to identify funding for the construction and operations of this centre. The Somali Centre is also planning on fundraising a portion of the capital required for this facility.

Next Steps

Staff will continue working with the Somali Centre in a collaborative process. This includes reviewing a financial strategy prepared by the Somali Centre with detailed capital costs and construction financing information as well as a plan to fund the long-term operating costs, all to be borne by the Somali Centre. There is also a need for the Somali Centre to provide a proposed operating model that offers guaranteed public access to the facilities and programming of the proposed Somali Centre.

CreateTO, Parks Forestry and Recreation, Social Development Finance and Administration, Economic Development and Culture, and Corporate Real Estate Management staff propose to report back with an update on the Somali Centre, which may include next steps on the financial strategy, operating model, site selection and lease or license arrangements, design, development and other related updates. This is contingent upon the outcome of a staff review and recommendation of a proposed financial strategy, operating model and due diligence on the sites.

CONTACT

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SIGNATURE

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ATTACHMENTS

Confidential Attachment 1 - Overview of sites reviewed by CreateTO.