

Committee of the Whole (Closed Session) Report

DATE: Tuesday, March 19, 2024

WARD: 1

TITLE: 10800 WESTON ROAD UPDATE (REFERRED)

FROM:

Gus Michaels, Deputy City Manager, Community Services
Haiqing Xu, Deputy City Manager, Planning and Growth Management

ACTION: FOR INFORMATION

Purpose

The purpose of this report is to provide Council with updated information on the current state of the subject property municipally known as 10800 Weston Road, currently owned and operated by Miracle Arena For All Nations as it relates to the land use and related site conditions.

Report Highlights

- This past summer, City Staff became aware of the housing of asylum seekers at the Miracle Arena For All Nations (MAFAN) Church, located at 10800 Weston Road.
- City Staff are working with our partners at York Region Community and Health Services to accommodate the re-housing of these individuals in available shelter spaces.
- Zoning By-law 001-2021 does not permit a place of worship or the use of accessory structures or buildings for human habitation at the property; nor is a place of worship permitted under the Greenbelt Plan (2017).
- Building permits have not been obtained for the structures/additions (e.g. trailers, portables, small buildings) that have been added since MAFAN took ownership of the lands in 2020.
- City staff have identified other infractions on the property, including but not limited to contraventions of the City's Fill & Site Alteration By-law, Sewer Use By-law (which has now been addressed), Property Standards By-law, Animal Control By-law, as well as the Ontario Fire Code.
- Staff from the Toronto Region Conservation Authority, York Region, and the Ministry of Environment, Conservation and Parks have also identified contraventions of provincial legislation at the property.

Recommendations

Committee of the Whole at its meeting on March 5, 2024, adopted the following recommendation (Item 8, Report No. 7)

Recommendation of the Committee of the Whole of March 5, 2024:

The Committee of the Whole recommends that consideration of this matter be deferred to the Committee of the Whole (Closed Session) meeting of March 19, 2024.

Report of the Deputy City Manager, Community Services and Deputy City Manager, Planning and Growth Management, dated March 5, 2024:

1. THAT this report be received; and
2. THAT a copy of this report be sent to York Region.

Background

As a diverse and welcoming community, the City of Vaughan welcomes newcomers, including refugee claimants and asylum seekers every year. This past summer, City Staff became aware of the housing of asylum seekers at the Miracle Arena For All

Nations (MAFAN) Church, located at 10800 Weston Road. The use of the subject lands as a place of worship is not permitted under the City's current Zoning By-law, and building permits have not been obtained for a number of structures and additions on the property.

City Staff are working with our partners at York Region Community and Health Services to accommodate the re-housing of these individuals in available shelter spaces. York Region Community and Health Services continues to provide necessary social services support like connecting asylum seekers with provincial and federal support programs.

Previous Reports/Authority

N/A

Analysis and Options

In the summer of 2023, York Region and City of Vaughan staff learned that MAFAN was bringing refugees and asylum seekers to the subject lands to be housed in newly installed/constructed accessory structures. Zoning By-law 001-2021 does not permit accessory structures or buildings to be used for human habitation. The property is also not zoned for a place of worship by Zoning By-law 001-2021, nor is a place of worship permitted by the Greenbelt Plan (2017). MAFAN's planning representative has indicated that they have petitioned the Minister of Municipal Affairs & Housing for a Minister's Zoning Order ("MZO") to recognize the place of worship and its associated uses as permitted uses in the Greenbelt. To date, there has been no demonstration of progression in this regard. Although MAFAN indicated its intent to submit applications for minor variances (including to permit the current use) on January 22, 2024, MAFAN have since indicated that they will not be pursuing minor variances until a decision from the Minister is made on the MZO.

Building permits have not been obtained for the structures/additions (e.g. trailers, portables, small buildings) that have been added since MAFAN took ownership of the lands in 2020. Additionally, City staff have identified other infractions on the property, including contraventions of the Fire Code, the City's Fill & Site Alteration By-law, Sewer Use By-law (which has now been addressed), Property Standards By-law, and Animal Control By-law. Staff from the Toronto Region Conservation Authority, York Region, and the Ministry of Environment, Conservation and Parks have also identified contraventions of provincial legislation at the property. Enforcement of those contraventions is ongoing.

The Mayor, City Staff and staff from the Region (with respect to public health standards for water and food preparation) and our partner agencies have had several discussions with representatives of MAFAN with respect to the ongoing violations of City by-laws and provincial legislation. An update on the ongoing enforcement is further detailed in the accompanying confidential communication.

In the absence of Federal and Provincial response, York Region staff have urgently worked to provide emergency alternative accommodations to relocate refugees from the recently constructed/installed structures at the property to alternative safe transitional accommodations. In that regard, in 2023 and after an allocation of \$4.3 million dollars by its council, York Region was able to open a temporary hotel-based Interim Accommodations and Supports Site for asylum seekers and refugee claimants and has since secured a second site as of December 22, 2023. Many of the asylum seekers and refugee claimants then sheltering at MAFAN were offered the choice to move to this interim site operated by the Region's Emergency Social Services partner, the Canadian Red Cross. [At this point the exact number of people who continue to live on the MAFAN property is unknown, although the Region has requested MAFAN to provide this information.]

To further demonstrate the commitment of support to asylum seekers and refugee claimants, City of Vaughan Community Services/Recreation Services continues to offer recreational space at an identified Community Centre until the end of March to provide limited social and recreational programming, aimed at social inclusion, recreational activity and wellbeing.

Financial Impact

There are no financial impacts as it relates to this report.

Broader Regional Impacts/Considerations

Addressing quality of life issues and providing accommodations for refugees and asylum seekers remains a critical priority for the City of Vaughan and York Region. There are encouraging results from York Region's Interim Accommodations and Supports Sites (interim sites) for asylum seekers and refugee claimants in Vaughan.

The interim sites continue to successfully support asylum seekers and refugee claimants as they work to settle in Canada. As of January 22, 2024, the interim sites had a combined 85 rooms dedicated to supporting 142 asylum seekers. Since the opening of the interim sites, over 155 people have been accommodated and received the necessary services.

With onsite settlement support provided by COSTI Immigrant Services, people at the interim site are securing permanent housing at rates comparable to people previously staying at the Region's Ukrainian response site – even though those staying at the Region's Ukrainian response site arrived with Canada-Ukraine authorization for emergency travel Visas, granting them immediate emergency financial, employment and other settlement supports. Conversely, most people now staying at the interim sites arrive with no such pre-established supports and require extensive refugee settlement services to secure financial assistance, employment and permanent housing. As of January 22, 2024, 38 adults and 15 children have successfully secured long-term housing.

The interim site at a hotel in Vaughan is closing March 31, 2024, and the Region is offering alternate interim accommodation for anyone still not housed as of that date. The interim site at a hotel in Markham is scaling up, and additional rooms at other locations in the Region will also be made available as required. While most of the rooms at the hotel site are being used by asylum seekers associated with MAFAN, spaces at the interim sites are not exclusively for this purpose. Space is also being leveraged for asylum seekers more broadly in critical need of support who arrive in York Region.

Refugee claimants currently staying at MAFAN have been prioritized for access to accommodation to support their movement off of the MAFAN property should they decide to move. Region staff continue to effectively evolve their Regional homelessness response plan to support all persons experiencing homelessness in York Region.

Despite the critical work undertaken by the City and Regional staff, there is an urgent need for additional federal and provincial support and coordination.

Like its GTHA neighbours, York Region continues to help asylum seekers settle in the community, achieve stability and find employment. Although municipalities do not play a direct role, and provincial governments are responsible for individuals seeking asylum/claiming refugee status in Canada (the federal government is responsible for planned immigration and those granted refugee/asylum status), GTHA municipalities are assuming greater responsibilities as asylum seekers/refugee claimants need a range of supports, including services that fall under regional jurisdiction, such as emergency and transitional housing, income support and public health.

Funding for these supports for refugees and asylum seekers arriving in the GTHA remains a major concern. Federal and provincial funding and coordination are essential in aiding municipalities, including York Region.

On December 7, 2023, a letter was sent by the York Region Chairman to the federal Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, requesting \$4.3 million in Interim Housing Assistance Program funding to offset municipal costs. On January 25, 2024, York Region council approved a motion requesting federal funding of \$2.7 million to cover costs incurred in 2023, and \$14.1 million to be able to provide interim emergency accommodation for refugees and asylum seekers in 2024 at current service levels.

Conclusion

City Staff are committed to working with our partners at York Region Community and Health Services to support the re-housing of refugee claimants and asylum seekers; while taking all reasonable steps to support the health, safety and wellbeing of those impacted. Staff will continue to communicate with MAFAN and take all necessary steps to ensure compliance with the use and alteration of the lands at 10800 Weston Road.

Attachment

1. Confidential Attachment #1 (Mayor and Members of Council only).

Prepared by

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Approved by



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