

January 28, 2024

To: Transition House, Town of Cobourg, Northumberland County, Province of Ontario

Response to proposal for a low-barrier homeless shelter located at 310 Division St., Cobourg

It is very clear that homelessness, addictions to toxic drugs, and mental health challenges are increasing in Cobourg. An improved strategy is desperately needed for those who are dealing with these challenges; such a strategy must involve members of the community from all walks of life and government support at all levels (County, provincial and federal). Without thoughtful, inclusive planning, existing problems will continue to escalate and the consequences may be dire for the well-being of the Town, its citizens and those who are unsheltered.

I've been involved in discussions with various groups regarding homelessness, public drug use, supports for those living with mental health issues and related challenges for about ten years, including a focus on the situation in Cobourg in the last five years. I have conducted research about adult education strategies for supporting people living with mental illness. I have taught courses on the politics of housing in Canada. I have visited the Mission United Hub in Oshawa and seen the catastrophic homeless situation in various cities in Canada and the United States. These experiences inform my comments about the proposed expansion of the Transition House emergency shelter from 4 bedrooms sheltering 18 people to a much larger facility with 47 bedrooms available (including 35 low barrier shelter spaces).

I've lived in the vicinity of Transition House since it moved to 10 Chapel Street in the early 2000s. It was not until it reopened in October 2018 as a low-barrier emergency shelter that recurring problems have been experienced in the neighbourhood. Between January and September 2019, one newspaper reported that emergency services were called to Transition House over 200 times: over 83 times for Northumberland County Paramedics; over 100 times for Cobourg Police; over 23 times for Cobourg Fire Department (Pete Fisher, Today's Northumberland, 5 September 2019). This amounts to almost daily disruptions simply due to EMS calls. Add in the non-reported disruptions and it is clear why those living near Transition House are feeling overwhelmed.

Anecdotally, fewer problems have occurred when the bulk of the residents and those unsheltered were located away from 10 Chapel St. For example, during the early months of the pandemic when folks were housed at Cobourg Collegiate Institute and, more recently when tent encampments have been located at Brookside or on William St. The empirical data shows that crime rates have been increasing in recent years despite minor fluctuations. For example, in 2022, Cobourg's Crime Severity Index (CSI) has been almost double that of Port Hope, both overall and regarding violent crime. Maps of crime in Cobourg suggest that crime tends to be located in the downtown vicinity near Transition House. Over the last 8 years, assaults have doubled in Cobourg.¹

Over the past 5 or 6 years, I have met with various representatives of Transition House, Cobourg Town Council, Northumberland County, and other groups. The concerns that I and others have expressed have consistently been dismissed as being a larger community problem, and not the responsibility of the Town of Cobourg, Northumberland County, or those running and funding Transition House as a long-term, low-barrier, crisis-oriented emergency shelter. I agree that it is true that there is a larger problem across

¹ I note that the data for crime statistics have been publicly reported unevenly and terminology has changed over the years. My estimates are based on what is publicly available.

Canada that is extremely difficult to mitigate. Nonetheless, simply plopping a high-density, low-barrier shelter in the middle of a small town is not the best situation. The nature of small communities is such that even small changes in the perception of safety in the downtown area can be devastating for local small businesses and residents. I have long argued that finding a path forward that supports both the community members AND the residents of Transition House is both possible and necessary. It may not be easy and it will require creative thinking, but I believe it can be done by working together.

Examples of Community Engagement and Consultation

In the past two years, other small communities have begun to address the externalities of decisions to locate shelters in residential and small business areas by including a community liaison or neighbourhood committee as part of the management structure of the facility. Following the example of the agreement between [Durham Region](#) and the Township of Brock regarding supportive housing in Beaverton, for example, the [Town of Whitby and Durham Region](#) recently signed an agreement regarding the 1635 Dundas Street East shelter in which commitments were made regarding:

- A cap on the number of shelter spaces;
- Operational principles related to landscaping impacts on the community, onsite security provisions and intake priorities;
- A cost sharing agreement with Whitby to assist Whitby in addressing incremental or additional clean up in the immediately vicinity of the shelter;
- Terms of Reference for a Community Liaison Committee;
- Continued Communication framework with Whitby;
- An outline of the planned process for engagement and approval by Regional Council of the uses for the remaining space at 1635 Dundas Street East;
- An intake process that includes a code of conduct and orientation for Shelter Occupants who must “comply with local laws and by-laws” and “act as good neighbours in the community;”
- Provision of Wrap Around Services and On-site Services for shelter occupants;
- Close communications and updates between Durham Region, Whitby’s CAO and Mayor.

The agreement further elaborates that a low-barrier shelter is not a “no barrier” shelter space and that “living in a community with other people means following enforceable principles of a code of conduct. In addition, Durham Region agreed to present information to and engage with the Community Liaison Committee. Durham Region also committed to designing and constructing the Shelter using the principles of Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED) in order to mitigate impacts to and maintain the safety of, neighbouring residents. Other commitments regarding safety include:

- Onsite security 24 hours per day, 7 days per week;
- Mobile security teams in the vicinity of the shelter;
- Providing a location for outreach teams;
- Transparent tracking of crime statistics, complaints, service calls and other police and non-police data relevant to the provision of municipal services in the area;
- Designing and constructing two outdoor smoking areas that are 9 meters away from any entrance to the building or neighbouring properties and that are cleaned and maintained to the Regional standard.

A key component of this agreement is the creation of the Community Liaison Committee (CLC). This CLC has a mandate to not only share and disseminate information, it is also to identify issues and concerns that impact area residents. Both the Region and Whitby agreed that public areas (e.g., roads, sidewalks, bus shelters, public parks) should be kept free of additional refuse, shopping carts, luggage, drug paraphernalia and the like to ensure that all members of the community can use these spaces. In regard to this component, Durham Region will share in the cost of incremental services in the vicinity of the Shelter. Further, a 3-metre (10-foot) privacy fence would be built to separate the Shelter from adjacent properties. More details can be found in the attached copy of the agreement.

The [Beaverton assessment study](#) noted some important considerations that would be useful for 310 Division St., including assurances that an appropriate level of staffing will be maintained. This will be especially important given the much larger size of the building compared to the Chapel St. facility. Consideration for the security of both the residents and neighbours will be important, for example, will residents be allowed to have visitors; if so, for how long, will they be monitored, will they be signed in/out, and so on.

Globally, agreements between organizations and neighbourhoods have been used to facilitate good relationships and safer communities. Examples can be found across Canada and the United States:

- [City of Calgary](#)
- [Elliott Street Supportive Housing Good Neighbor Agreement](#)
- [Seattle](#)
- [George Spady Society Supervised Consumption Service/ Medical Detox Unit Radius Community Health and Healing](#)
- [Arbor Lodge Shelter \(Oregon\)](#)
- [City of Evanston](#)
- [SUPPORTIVE HOUSING GOOD NEIGHBOR AGREEMENT](#)

Overall, the need for a larger emergency shelter is clear, but it needs to be properly funded, staffed, and supported such that externalities are not ignored. Emergency shelters are supposed to be temporary measures until permanent housing can be found. Yet, the County is now creating a larger, more expensive shelter. In lieu of improved permanent housing, it is incumbent upon Transition House, the County, and the Town to implement measures that will decrease the incidence of crime, harassment, and public drug use in the vicinity of the new, very large facility.

Importance of paying attention to impact on the downtown

An explanation of downtown recovery and how to prevent the death of downtown ([explainer video](#)) as it relates to cities is useful even for smaller towns like Cobourg. When a downtown begins to lose residents, businesses and visitors, the “donut effect” can occur. This analogy has been used to describe the loss of vibrant downtown cores, often due to feelings that the downtown is unsafe or that there are no businesses to frequent. While small town downtowns clearly have been suffering for a long time, it seems logical to consider how the increasing visibility of homelessness and tent encampments and the like will exacerbate an already challenging situation. The more that people stay away from the downtown stores, the more likely that businesses will relocate outside the downtown core, which in turn will worsen any problems and reduce the taxes and fees that the Town can collect.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I encourage all involved in the planning for the new Transition House to bear in mind the experiences of those who have lived in the vicinity of Transition House for many years, as well as the financial needs of Cobourg as a town to be able to best support both citizens who are housed and unsheltered. Although consultations are currently underway, there is uneven communications about how these consultations will be used moving forward, what the metrics of success will look like, if those metrics will broadly include externalities (such as additional emergency calls, impact on the neighbouring community, etc.). It is unclear how the Town will be compensated for the additional costs entailed in having a very large shelter located on a busy main street in the middle of the tourist area and a residential neighbourhood. Given the history of problems (violence, harassment, open drug use, discarded needles, etc.) with residents of Transition House, how will the County and the Province of Ontario ensure that Transition House is effectively operated in a way that not only provides beds for those unsheltered, but also improves the quality of life for all who live in the vicinity of this low-barrier, emergency shelter?

Sincerely,

Alyson King



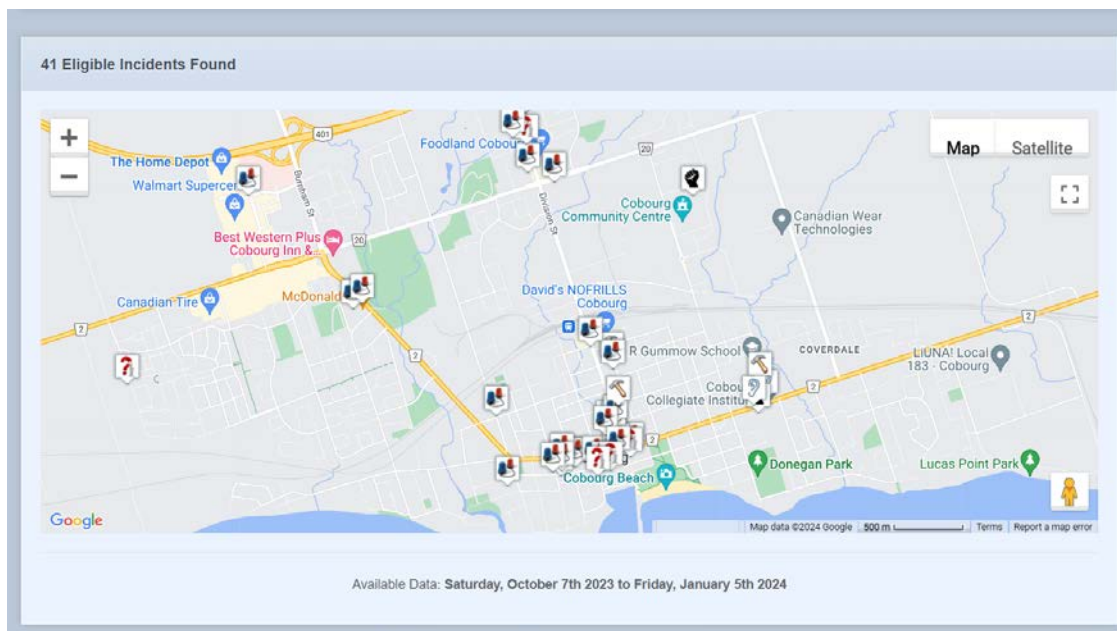
Some data:

The Canada Crime Index for 2022, shows Cobourg (population 19,830) as having significantly more serious crime than either Port Hope (pop. 13,012) and Hamilton Township.

The Crime Severity Index (CSI) monitors the severity level of police-reported crime. The CSI measures the overall seriousness of crime from one year to the next by tracking both the prevalence of crime within a community, and the seriousness of the crimes committed. This provides a better understanding of the impact that crime has on individual community members, their families, and the community as a whole. ([U of Waterloo](#))

Town	Pop.	Overall		Violent crime		Non-violent crime			
		CSI	% change	CSI	% change	CSI	% change		
Cobourg	19,830	68.9	+2.3%	85.1	+41.7%	63.0	-63.0		
Port Hope	13,012	35.0	+2.3%	45.5	+34.6%	31.1	-10.3%		
Northumberland (Hamilton)	11,059	15.5	-15.3%	17.1	27.7%	15.0	-8.0		
Northumberland (Brighton)	5,847	44.3	-16.2%	60.0	-24.6%	38.4	-10.0%		

The map of reported crime, below, from Oct. 7, 2023, to Jan. 5, 2024, shows that incidents are clustered in the downtown area (<https://www.crimeplot.com/agency/11/cobourg-police-service.html>).



A look at the [Annual Reports](#) published by the Cobourg Police Service shows the following statistics (noting that not all reports included full data).

YEAR	Assault/Sexual Assault	Theft/Robbery	Violent Crimes	Break & Enter
2013	114	246	199	46
2014	88	345	172	32

2015	139	240	218	26
2018	290	29 [Theft category not listed]	Category not listed	51
2019	270	603	Category not listed	57
2020	240	21 [Theft category not listed]	Category not listed	70