

Dec 6, 2023

**Letter To The Northumberland County Council Regarding The Recent Purchase Of  
310 Division Street For Use As Low Barrier Emergency Shelter**

We are here today in a unique position possessing several different perspectives related to the proposed use of 310 Division Street as Northumberland's Emergency Low Barrier Shelter. For 17-years we have lived and worked within 100 metres of both the current and proposed new site.

We are business owners and employers of 18 healthcare professionals, 95% of which are taxpayers in Northumberland County.

We are property owners having lovingly restored 304 Division St. sitting directly south to 310 Division, and more recently 301 Division St., which sits directly across the street, for the purpose of housing our business (Cobourg Orthopaedic & Sports Injury Clinic - COSIC), as well as, an effort to positively affect downtown Cobourg.

We were downtown residents for 6-years. We understand the unique landscape of downtown living.

We are involved community supporters - supporting numerous organizations focusing on enhancing life in Cobourg and within the Northumberland County.

Lastly, we are regulated Healthcare Professionals by trade. We have empathy, compassion and a true understanding of the complexities surrounding individuals who are homeless, and we support helping people in need. We understand the dynamics of mental health issues, opioid use and addiction, as well as the science behind how this has influenced every community across our country. It is also why we have remained largely quiet up until now. We have genuinely tried to bring positivity and optimism about the realities of how our downtown has changed while at work interacting with hundreds of Northumberland residents as they witness our concerns at our clinic on a weekly basis.

Like many people here today, we are proud to call Northumberland County home, but are genuinely concerned about the state of chaos that has become common place in our neighbourhood and extending into downtown Cobourg over the last 4-years, as well as the lack of meaningful progress to improve these issues. Transition House was already in place in its current location when we purchased 304 Division St and moved to Cobourg, and for 13-years we happily shared a fence line and neighbourhood with almost no issues. Over the last 4-years, Transition House changed their model of care, becoming a low barrier emergency shelter, which immediately negatively impacted our neighbourhood and downtown Cobourg.

Despite efforts from town and county council, law enforcement, transition house, social services, and community support - on the ground level, day-to-day very little has changed to improve the conditions of chaos in our neighbourhood and provide true help for the folks with high needs.

Unfortunately, vandalism, theft, explicit drug use, trespassing, intimidation, dumping garbage, public urination and defecation, as well as, verbal and physical assaults continue to be daily occurrences on our properties and at our businesses – more so than in any other neighbourhood in Cobourg, and likely in all of Northumberland County.

Northumberland News reported on September 6, 2023, that these are the exact behaviours that Northumberland County Council and the Northumberland Paramedics Chief condemned as being unacceptable at their location at 600 William St., when members of the encampment settled for a couple of weeks.

As a result, the county hired a security firm, to provide on-site security 24/7 to ensure safety for employees, and so operations weren't negatively impacted for the public.

The report went on to site continued aggressiveness toward county staff and security, people peering into the workplace, people startling staff during night hours, vehicles being targeted for theft, employees feeling unsafe to report to work, employees feeling unsafe walking to their vehicles, employees being flagged down for food, money, hydro and the use of washrooms as the reasons for the encampment being deemed unsustainable at 600 William St. and ultimately disbanded. Employees of the county were emotionally spent after two weeks. This has been the reality for the residents and businesses in the area of Division and Chapel and downtown Cobourg daily for the last 4-years.

To be clear, it's not fair to blame residents of Transition House for all the disorderly behaviour in our neighbourhood and downtown Cobourg, but it attracts associates that engage in this behaviour. Research supports this relationship, as it has become a hub for disorderly conduct on surrounding properties during the day.

A couple of years ago, during COVID when Transition House temporarily relocated to CCI high school for the summer, we were witness to an unintended social study. For 2-months there was virtually no disorderly behaviour in our neighbourhood which is supported by police data. It was dramatically improved, and our experience is consistent with what Canadian research has determined with low barrier shelters. The research suggests the presence of emergency shelters cause property crimes to increase 56% within 100 meters of the shelter for surrounding properties. This effect progressively decreases as you get further away from the shelter.

Relocating Northumberland's Emergency Shelter at 310 Division St. without question imposes significant negative consequences for the residential and commercial neighbours, which extend into the entire downtown. These consequences negatively influence our shops, restaurants,

retailers, professionals, bankers, tourism, service providers – essentially everyone. All of this to provide beds for 22 people in the current transition house, that have consistently had a 50% vacancy in recent months. We are not trying to undermine the importance of the service that Transition House provides the residents of Northumberland in need, rather feel that further community consultation is necessary to determine if this is the best use of funding and if this is this the best location to deliver these services considering the consequences.

To circle back, we are here not to condemn the efforts of people in our community to improve the chaos in our neighbourhood or downtown, nor the usefulness of such shelters, but to explain that there is a clear pattern of failed efforts of low barrier shelters located in downtown Cobourg in the past. We have legitimate concerns about the implementation and execution of a larger emergency shelter when there are already consistent significant vacancies in the existing one. We also, quite frankly, question the appropriateness of the entire proposed use of this new site at 310 Division St.

### **Our Concerns**

- Safety – for our employees, families, and customers. On a daily basis we are on heightened alert, walking patients to their cars, have the police on speed dial and are forced to engage regularly in intense negative interactions with highly unpredictable, high needs members of the community when our calm, respectful requests are denied. Fire and police data demonstrate these claims. This experience is consistent with business owners and residents in the area.
- Process – Putting a new emergency shelter in a neighbourhood is a significant issue for all stakeholders. The lack of community engagement in the conceptual phase of this project on the surface seems like complete disregard for the impact on surrounding businesses and residents, let alone the insight that we could offer to implement the new one and the missed opportunity to build valuable community relationships. Who advised the county to place the shelter at this specific location? Were consultants involved in choosing the location? Did you consult other communities doing the same thing to see their success with similar projects? Residents of the neighbourhood and Cobourg at large certainly were not asked for input prior to the purchase of this site. Does bringing services to high needs individuals in a less residential and commercial setting make more sense for this project? Is there a better solution?
- Parking – Is there enough? Are there different regulations for shelters than regular institutionally zoned properties? The retirement home occupants who previously occupied the site didn't have cars, and the staff and service providers didn't have enough parking. The town had strict demands on our parking requirements during our clinic renovation process. Do these regulations apply to this project?
- State of the building - What will the general appearance of the building look like? Shopping carts, abandoned bicycles, vast amounts of garbage, etc. are left outside Transition House and neighbouring properties on a daily basis, not to mention ongoing disorderly behaviour.

- Capacity – What is the perceived maximum number of residents? How many employees are necessary to support this larger building and increase in residents appropriately? Is there ongoing funding committed to support this?
- Devalued Property Values – Being beside a super-sized emergency shelter is not the first thing most people have on their list when shopping for real estate. This WILL devalue the properties surrounding the shelter and in the downtown, also discouraging growth of commerce and tourism opportunities. The current Transition House has already done this to our neighborhood. Is this fair to put such a huge financial burden on a small group of individuals who are contributing to the community and rely on retained value for their retirement? There are no pensions in the self-employed world. Is the County prepared to compensate these property owners as we have seen in other communities? These concerns need to be addressed.
- Cost to the tax payer – What is the cost of the building and estimated renovation costs? Is this the best use of funds for this issue or a knee jerk reaction to the homeless crisis?

We are not suggesting that people who are homeless don't deserve safe housing, compassion and consideration. The concern is the location and necessity of a new emergency shelter. We are in complete support of the County using this property for suitable housing. This building is suitable for many types of housing for vulnerable people in our community. The current Transition House regularly runs at half capacity, and is proven to not be the solution to the encampment, given these vacancies. If you have other future plans for this space, as you have alluded to in your press release, we ask that you consult the stakeholders and hold off on using this building, until you can provide what is actually needed in our community.

We are asking today that although Northumberland County moved quickly to purchase this building, that you reconsider the current plan and use. Consider making 310 Division Street low income housing for seniors, a solution for unhoused singles, or families and the working poor with strict oversight from the County.

Four years ago Transition House changed to a low barrier shelter, and the community management did not change. The neighbourhood was left on its own to take care of the effects of the policy change and it has been a disaster. We are asking that as you make yet another change, your community management strategy matches the needs. And if you cannot commit to making these changes the project should not move forward.

What are the alternative solutions to this issue? We know that you are resistant to re-visiting the re-purposing of the Golden Plough Lodge because of decisions made 13-years ago, predating the opioid crisis, but the reality is that it is currently in full working order, housing 151 of our seniors. It is close to the hospital, mental health services, the County housing and social services, as well as, every other service 310 Division allows that you listed in your press release. It is not directly a part of a densely populated residential or commercial area and does not have

direct neighbours that would be affected, nor the influence on property values. Keep Transition House in its' form with improved delivery of emergency spaces, and wait until the Plough is available.

If the Plough is not feasible, consider the property as the future home for such a facility once demolished or be patient in selecting a better suited property, considering the emergency shelter vacancies.

Perhaps it makes more sense to divide the shelter spaces across the County in a more equitable manor. This would allow the financial consequences to be spread equitably among the individual municipalities.

Let's be clear, we represent the majority of Chapel and Division Street residents, downtown business owners and Cobourg residents at large. We implore you to reconsider the appropriateness of 310 Division Street as low barrier emergency shelter. We ask that you commit today to halting all progress of developing this site until you gain a more comprehensive perspective of the vast concerns of Cobourg residents related to this project .

This decision will dramatically shape the quality of life for all community members in Northumberland County for years to come. We ask you to be thoughtful about the next steps. We are asking that you take the neighbouring homes and businesses seriously into account, and offer ongoing meaningful engagement. We expect to hear from you on how we can move forward together as partners in a solution.

The County purchased at \$2.3 million dollar building, without knowing full operating costs, in a period of 4 weeks from start to close, when emergency shelter capacity is at 50%, without the consultation of the taxpayers and stakeholders. We encourage Northumberland citizens who share our concerns to contact the County and the Town of Cobourg to discuss this project.

Thank-you for your consideration,

Dr. Hillary Allen & Mr. Jeff Crowley