

Dufferin Men's Shelter in crisis: Urgent funding requested to keep doors open

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Dufferin County Council has declared the Dufferin Men's Shelter a 'project in difficulty' after receiving a request for emergency funding to keep their doors open for the remainder of the year.

During their meeting on Sept. 14, Dufferin County Council was presented with a business plan from Keith Ward, a Dufferin Men's Shelter board member, asking to obtain \$215,000 in urgent funding. Ward said the funding would allow the shelter to remain open through the winter and into Dufferin County municipalities' budget cycles.

"When we started, we could only guesstimate what the cost would be. No one else is doing this locally, it's not as if we have another comparator we could run out to and say 'please give us your numbers', we had to start from scratch," explained Ward. "We have numbers from shelters elsewhere in the GTA, but they're much higher and we knew it would take some real-world experience to come up with some better numbers."

The Dufferin Men's Shelter, located at 59 Townline in Orangeville, was opened by the Choice's Youth Shelter organization in March 2023. The shelter provides local men aged 25 years and up experiencing homelessness an alternative to living on the street while connecting them with resources to transition to stable housing and gain independence. The shelter initially opened with 6 available beds but increased due to demand and now has a capacity of 20 beds.

According to Ward, the shelter, on average, sees between 10 to 13 men each night but has also seen as many as 15.

The County of Dufferin previously provided the shelter with \$163,000 in funding when it opened earlier this year.

In a Health and Human Services Committee meeting held by County Council on Aug. 28, Dufferin Men's Shelter director Erin Goodyear said the funding had been used to pay staff members' salaries and that it has no other forms of revenue. She added that the shelter only had enough funding to support continued operation to the end of September.

The shelter has fundraised to gather additional financial support, but Ward said with the shelter's uncertain future, it's been "impossible" to fundraise because there is no guarantee the service will continue.

He also noted the difficulty the shelter has faced in obtaining additional funding from other sources due to the lack of programs that cater to its demographic of solely serving men. With such limited support, the shelter relies on public funding and donations.

"Men are not an appealing population when it comes to shelters," said Ward. "There aren't programs out there that provide funding through other avenues as there are for women, for children, or for people subject to abuse."

A number of councillors raised concerns about the cost of the operations, which requires a base funding of \$370,000 annually, and the possibility of additional funding requests from the group in the following months.

"There doesn't seem to be any long-term plan that isn't heavily or exclusively reliant on County funding," said Dufferin County Warden Wade Mills. "We're going to put some tax-based money at this to keep the lights on for a couple more months, but we're not really going to solve a problem."

Coun. Fred Nix, deputy mayor of Mono, raised concerns with the cost of operating the men's shelter, noting that the roughly \$152 per night cost is more expensive than putting an individual up in a motel for the night.

Ward explained that the Dufferin Men's Shelter is not only about having a place to sleep but offering a number of services to the men, including access to food security, employment searches, counselling for substance abuse and mental health, and criminal justice support.

'Our job is to try to stop people from coming back,' said Ward. 'If you simply put people in a motel that's not going to stop them coming back, so it's important to offer the services to the men to make sure they're getting what they need to actually stabilize themselves.'

The County of Dufferin has a motel program run by its director of community services, Anna McGregor, and her team, which allows the OPP to give people a room for the night. According to McGregor, the motel program has operated in the County for well over a decade.

'That runs and still runs, but in addition to that we have a number of hotel rooms that we used and some of that was scaled back when the men's shelter opened,' said McGregor.

Coun. Darren White, also Melancthon's mayor, raised concerns about the sustainability of the men's shelter with the lack of revenue avenues within the business plan.

'At the end of the day, the county is not 100 per cent funded for any of the organizations we helped fund, not because we don't want to but because we only have a finite amount of capacity in order to fund,' said Coun. Todd Taylor, deputy mayor of Orangeville.

He added that he doesn't think the shelter operation will be successful.

'I think we're throwing away money. I would support this with parameters in place, but since we don't have the parameters written at this point, I don't know what we would vote on. It just doesn't feel like a good thing.'

Dufferin County councillors also expressed concerns about what would happen should the men's shelter shut down due to a lack of funding from the County.

'If we lose the shelter, I'm still not convinced that these men will be taken care of,' said Coun. James McLean, deputy mayor of Melancthon.

'I don't really care where the money goes, but if not this then what? There is a need for this service and it's growing,' said Coun. Philip Renstch, deputy mayor of Grand Valley. 'At the end of the day, this is the issue for this term so if you don't like this plan, give me a better one ? I haven't heard one yet.'

In response to the funding request, County Council voted to name the Dufferin Men's Shelter a 'project in difficulty.' The declaration has a limited time status and would see staff members work with the organization to provide appropriate governance and financial sustainability.

'It does rely on people being open and honest and showing us their books and having us in their meetings,' said McGregor.

County Council approved a motion to provide funding up to \$116,000 to the Dufferin Men's Shelter based on the 'project in difficulty' model. The motion stipulates the funding would be given in monthly installments to reflect the monthly costs of operating the shelter. The motion also says a report must be given to County Council in a month to re-evaluate the funding.