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Non-profit agencies may find homes in surplus space - Councillors seek resolution as a means to help

by Susan O'Neill

Turning over surplus city properties to community agencies in need of programming space would go a long way toward meeting the needs of groups across Toronto that are struggling to provide services.

So said **Ward 1 Councillor Suzan Hall (Etobicoke North)** who told members of Toronto's community services committee Thursday that the city has a role to play in helping non-profit agencies find suitable locations for programming, particularly in high-risk neighbourhoods.

The first priority for the allocation of surplus city space is currently housing.

And Hall maintained the second option should be community use.

"Our agencies are experiencing extreme difficulties," Hall told the committee, noting that not only is there a shortage of space in her ward, but rent is particularly expensive. "That is our reality."

Hall pointed to the Albion Boys and Girls Club as an example of an agency that would greatly benefit from a new location.

The organization is currently located in an industrial area, which is difficult to access, she said.

"It is really problematic for them because there, one, isn't space available in our community and two, they couldn't afford the rent," she said.

Hall noted the Toronto Police Service will soon be vacating the current 23 Division site, which is being rebuilt. And she maintained that space would be ideal for community groups.

"It's on an industrial strip, but it's on Kipling Avenue, very, very accessible," she said, adding "there's a fair amount of space there; certainly more than enough for various agencies to take advantage of."

Hall continued saying that offering surplus space to community agencies would be an "extremely positive thing for the city to do.

"It doesn't mean that every facility that comes up surplus is going to be suitable for something like this and so there still is the opportunity to sell."

Ward 44 Councillor Gay Cowbourne (Scarborough East) also supported the idea, which would benefit the East Scarborough Storefront, an agency in need of programming space.

The agency has long been located in the Morningside Mall, but the retail centre is being demolished and the organization is being forced to find a new site.

But the group is also adjusting to federal funding cuts, she said.

"This group has found itself homeless," Cowbourne said, noting their "finances are strained to such a point that realistically if we cannot give them space this group will find itself with nowhere to operate from and they will find that they're turning away our seniors, they're turning away our youth in a priority area and this should not be happening," she said. "We need all the help we can get in these areas."

Cowbourne reported that her ward is primarily residential, with few options for space.

However, there is a building located just across the border in Ward 43 with a city space that is sitting empty.

"If by allowing them to use some space, which is sitting there empty, we can actually provide the space so that they can deliver their very much-needed services then I'm sorry it just is a no-brainer," she said. "We have to move forward with this. We have to give the space."

The committee recommended that city staff explore the feasibility of implementing a policy that would designate surplus space to non-profit community organizations serving vulnerable neighbourhoods.