

An open letter to my community

My dear Red Deerians,

I want to talk about shelter. I want to talk about shelter because it is one of the most important issues facing our Council and our community today, and because it truly affects us all whether you're accessing shelter services, selflessly working to support individuals experiencing homelessness or living and working near the current shelter. The topic of shelter in our city is important. It is complex. It is emotional. It is, in some cases, divisive. But that means people care about it, which is great news.

I write this letter to you, my dear community, because I see your passion. I feel your uncertainty, apprehension, and frustration around the topic of shelter, and I share in this. I also thank you for your continued engagement and patience around the topic of shelter. I commend, once again, those agencies and staff that provide service to our most vulnerable. I am grateful for the patience of the business community, their staff and residents who cope with the everyday challenges of living in proximity to the location.

The word shelter comes with all kinds of connotations, presumptions, assumptions, and feelings – some positive, some negative. It is an extraordinarily complex issue with its roots in mental health, trauma, and addiction. But I also know for me, like many of you, it also comes with feelings of compassion and hope. We know we need something different, something better for everyone in our community. My dear Red Deerians, we are not alone in the challenges we face. Sadly, we are not unique. Cities all over this province and country face similar challenges.

Today, I want to share information with you about our journey to select a site for the future shelter, some of the decisions we've made, and where that leaves us. I also want to talk a bit about our role in this process, and to absolutely assure you we are doing everything we can to find the best and right site for a future integrated shelter in Red Deer. It isn't all good news, but our community has patiently waited for an update from us, and today, I want to talk with you about how we are moving forward.

But first, I will answer the most pressing question in front of us: has a shelter site been selected? The answer is no; the sites City Council recommended to the Province of Alberta have not moved forward, but we, your City Council, are not giving up.

Unfortunately, many of the decisions and conversations we as City Council have had about shelter have been in closed meetings of Council. While this is not ideal, it was necessary to protect the integrity of the negotiation process with private landowners as we moved through site selection options. With that said, I do have information to share with you.

Over the past 14 months, City Council worked tirelessly with each other and with the community to understand what matters most to you when we are choosing a site. We know we must consider the

needs, values and vision of our city and its citizens. This has taken us to many different site options, with City Council ultimately considering three sites.

The first of the three sites selected by City Council was a site located in Railyards (downtown) along Taylor Drive. But, after hearing from the community, the downtown site was determined to be unsuitable, and City Council embarked on a process to dive deeper into understanding what constitutes a good site. City Council held a series of open meetings, laying out the factors that were most important to consider. These are things like access to services, impacts to the community including surrounding neighbours and businesses, and cost. And then, the site search began again.

After talking with our community and adjusting our process, we started over. In August 2022, with a list of 96 sites in hand, City Council narrowed their considerations and recommended to the Province of Alberta, a site located in north Red Deer. The Province did not approve this site because of its proximity to other nearby amenities that were deemed incompatible.

Then, we all took a deep breath and City Council rescoped, reconsidered and reevaluated formerly considered sites, also exploring new opportunities. In October 2022, City Council brought the site list up to 104 potential sites, eventually recommending a privately owned site located in south Red Deer. This recommendation was accepted, and the Province moved forward with land negotiations. These negotiations were unsuccessful, leaving us once again without a site. We were and remain greatly disappointed; however, private sales add a layer of complexity when it comes to securing a site. Put simply, we need a willing seller.

I want to take a minute to talk about our role in the project. The City of Red Deer is a partner in the shelter project with the Province of Alberta ultimately responsible for shelter services in our community.

Right now, we have an agreement with the Province of Alberta for The City of Red Deer to select the site (which must be approved by the Province), for the future integrated shelter. This is because we know our community best. There is a recognition that our local knowledge matters, and we agree. At any time throughout this process, City Council could have left the site selection process to the Province, but we are committed to representing your voice. This is what we are elected to do. So, we will stay the course, and we will find a site.

The Province continues to work with us as a partner on this project. They are at the table to guide and help us find the right place, setting out a vision for homelessness through their Homelessness Action Plan, which focuses on things like expanding shelter spaces for winter months, moving provincially funded shelters to 24-7 access, piloting models that connect clients directly with supports and services like recovery, housing, and emergency financial support. But we aren't there yet, and our community wants to see it before they can believe it. This is what I hear over and over again. And I get it. I understand because it is what City Council and I have been asking for as well.

The message I continue to take forward to our provincial colleagues is that NIMBY (not in my backyard) is real, and it is certainly not unique to Red Deer. People in Red Deer know a shelter is needed, but they are apprehensive and want to know what it will be.

Over the next number of days, weeks and months, City Council will work with the Province to find out more. In fact, I have already begun the outreach. I believe in the Province's vision, but there is more work to do so that we can make the best decision possible for our community. We need more information so

we can site a shelter in the right place, delivering the right services for the benefit of our entire city. That is the goal.

Before I sat down to write this letter, I asked my council colleagues what they wanted you to know, and they told me the following.

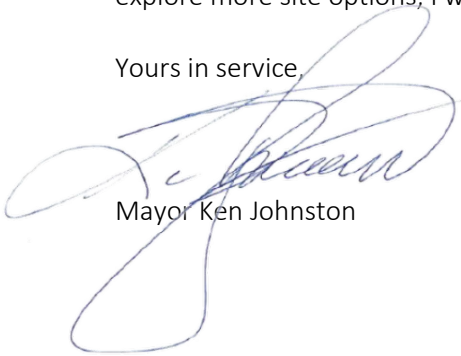
“We want the community to know we will not give up. We want them to know we will leave no stone unturned, and we will continue to represent the diverse perspectives of our citizens and our city.”

City Council has the best interests of the whole community in mind as we continue to navigate this process. We will continue to consider the potential social, economic, environmental, and financial impacts and needs of our city. And Red Deer, we also look to you for your help as we step into the next phase of this journey. I will be coming out into the community to ask questions and meet with stakeholders and community members. I am truly searching for that missing piece of information that may have eluded us. That thing we may not have considered. It might be a place. It might be an idea, an innovation. Surely it includes the need for housing and supports. I am moving into this next phase with intent to discover something, and I ask all of you in our community to do the same.

In closing, I want to acknowledge the efforts and contributions so many of you have already made. We have met with so many people. We have met with citizens who access shelter services and the incredible stakeholders who deliver these services. We have met with community partners, business owners and residents who have come to the table with open hearts and minds to help shape options and solutions throughout this process. And for this we thank you.

I continue to have the belief that we can and will be leaders in creating a new integrated shelter service that is extraordinary. This is certainly a complex and emotional topic, but as we go back to the table to explore more site options, I want you to know, I will see this through.

Yours in service,



Mayor Ken Johnston