

SAULT STE. MARIE

THE SAULT STAR



City to examine housing development partnership on Gateway property

Sault Ste. Marie needs more housing if it wants to grow its population and attract new residents from other parts of the province.

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View of east exterior of Civic Centre in Sault Ste. Marie, on Saturday, May 16, 2020.
PHOTO BY BRAIN KELLY

Build it and they will come.

That's the simplest way to explain Mayor Christian Provenzano's theory that building new housing on the Gateway site will help Sault Ste. Marie grow its population and create much-needed new residential units here.

City council unanimously passed a motion Monday, penned by Provenzano, designed to potentially help address the city's lack of new housing units.

Provenzano told city council that he convened a meeting with District Social Services CEO Mike Nadeau, Sault Ste. Marie Housing Corp., director Jeff Barban and senior city staff, to consider how the Gateway property can be used to help grow Sault Ste. Marie. The 13-acre brownfield property, owned by the City of Sault Ste. Marie, has previously been courted as a potential tourism destination site, but most recently, was considered by the Bawating Urban Indigenous Hub as a potential urban Indigenous housing and cultural development pegged at about \$40 million.

While that site was eventually not deemed appropriate for their use, Provenzano said a potential partnership between the city and the Sault Ste. Marie Housing Corp., could possibly result in a win-win situation for all.

He told council he's been considering the issue for quite some time.

The city, he said, wants to grow the community and the recent Census Canada data show the Sault hasn't grown, mainly because death rates are currently outstripping birth rates due to the city's aging demographics.

In order to continue to market Sault Ste. Marie as an attractive place to live, with lower living wage and quality amenities, the city needs more housing, he said.

"Ontario is sorely under built and we've seen that here," Provenzano told city council. "If we had more residential units here, more people would move here," he reasoned.

All types of residential units are needed – from single family dwellings to apartments and affordable housing, he noted.

The need has been reflected over the past several years with soaring housing prices and sellers often receiving offers thousands of dollars greater than their asking prices and housing selling much higher than what they had been worth before the COVID-19 pandemic began.

For years, the city has talked about developing the Gateway property but has waited for others to come forward to develop it, he said.

Now he's suggesting that the city work in partnership with the DSSAB's housing corporation to investigate whether it can create a development on the property, creating much-needed housing and populate the downtown with more residential units.

“There is no activity there now or any proposed development for that site,” Provenzano said.

He noted the resolution only asks the CAO and deputy of community development and enterprise services to work with the Sault Ste. Marie Housing Corp., to consider and assess a high density residential development for the Gateway site and report back to council on its findings.

The resolution doesn’t preclude the city from considering any other offers that may come forward in the near future.

Ward 2 Coun. Luke Dufour said that over the term of council the needle has moved on the site with the removal of the rail line on Bay Street and receiving the determination that the previous proposed housing project would not move forward.

“This investment makes sense,” Dufour said.

Ward 1 Coun. Paul Christian agreed. “We are marketing Sault Ste. Marie as an alternative to southern Ontario and it’s higher prices but the gap is closing. We need to keep it wide enough to make that marketing viable and we need more housing stock to do that.”

Councillors raised concerns about the environmental damage on the property as a result of its previous industrial use and how that may impact any future development, or the costs associated with any development.

Ward 3 Coun. Matthew Shoemaker also suggested that if the city knew the costs of that environmental cleanup, and funded the cleanup itself, the property might see an increase in demand for private sector development.

Provenzano said he doesn’t believe the former use or environmental contamination on the property is fatal enough to prevent projects from moving forward.

“Frankly, we need development and high-density residential development,” he said. “We need more (housing) units.”

Provenzano said he believes the success of a campaign to draw more people to Sault Ste. Marie is dependent on the need for those housing units and if they are available, it will attract more people here.

“I believe it will have a positive result if we try to work to develop (that site) and try to move a development forward now to help the community four years down the road,” he said.

The resolution was just one of several motions centring on housing that was passed by council Monday.

Another motion identified the need for Indigenous specific housing, acknowledging the disconcerting percentage of the city's homeless who are Indigenous and in need of supporting housing.

The resolution supports, in principle, efforts of the Indian Friendship Centre, Ontario Aboriginal Housing Services and DSSAB, working together to support the development of Indigenous-specific housing in the community. It also calls on the need for provincial and federal governments to provide annualized funding for the establishment and operation of supportive housing for all members of the community.

A third resolution, moved by Dufour, asks the city's planning department to report on the potential benefits and costs of the city adopting 'as of right' zoning in its new Official Plan, which would allow up to four units to occupy property that currently has single family residential zoning. The number of units would be subject to maximum lot coverage, height and parking minimums but would also help address the housing supply issue in the community.

A fourth resolution, also unanimously passed, directs Provenzano to pen a letter to Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing Steve Clark supporting a provincial co-investment fund that will partner with the DSSAB housing providers and developers to provide grants to build housing that is affordable for low income seniors. It also suggests that in recognition of the growth challenges in the North, that a Northern portion of the fund be greater than the sum of land transfer tax generated here.