



Deputation to North York Community Council Meeting – July 11, 2006

My name is Shedrack Agbakwa. I am from the African Canadian Legal Clinic (ACLC).

I thank you for the opportunity to speak to this issue. The neighbourhood that is being discussed today is part of the community served by the ACLC. We are seriously concerned with the proposal to build social housing at 1900 Sheppard Avenue West. We believe that a new social housing on this site is ill-advised and does not serve the best interests of the residents of the Jane and Sheppard community.

The Final Report of the Director, Community Planning (North York) under consideration today confirms an ugly truth– that the neighbourhood is already densely populated with social housing; it has twice the City average for social housing (15.0% compared to 7.7% across the City).

I should note that the Jane Street corridor between Wilson Avenue and Finch Avenue has an over-representation of African Canadians, disproportionately excessive poverty, high dropout and unemployment rate, and accounted for more than half of the gun violence in the City last summer.

The community in particular has witnessed first hand the devastating impact of decades of neglect and underdevelopment by all 3 levels of government. This neglect has led to extensive drugs, guns and gang activities and has further resulted in the shooting death of too many young African Canadian men. There are limited job and educational opportunities as well as a lack of meaningful access to government services and programs. This situation is compounded by higher poverty, unemployment and dropout rates, lack of recreational facilities, lack of community development, lack of business, entrepreneurial, and employment opportunities, virtual absence of mentorship programs, failure to engage youth, failure to provide positive options, and the failure to appropriately channel the youth's energy and curiosity. These communities are, to put it bluntly, centres of alienation and despair.

The Planning Report makes it clear that the local community is overwhelmingly opposed to the housing portion of the proposal; that they prefer a larger library and/or other community amenities on the site, such as programs for youth, seniors, recreation, and jobs/training programs. The community's preference better reflects the needs of this neighbourhood and will better serve its residents. It deserves the support of all well-meaning people. The City should listen to and respect the community's wishes.

Development theorists and practitioners have long realized that the top-down development model doesn't work and does not serve the best interests of the recipient communities. That is why bottom-up or similar development models which are informed by the communities' input as to what they believe is suitable for them have since been favoured. Sadly, the Director of Planning, the Mayor and some City Councilors who have no inkling of the real life experiences of people living in this community think they know better than the overwhelming majority of the

community. The Mayor and City Councilors should be listening to this community and not dictating to them.

The Report before you contemptuously disregards the overwhelming and unequivocal wishes of the community and recommends the approval of the proposal. Yet, it has no compelling answer to the major objections against the proposal, namely, that (a) it will result in further ghettoization of the community and reinforce apparent *de facto* segregation and apartheid in this part of the City; (b) it will lead to further concentrations of African Canadians, poor and desperate residents and worsen the sense of vulnerability and disadvantage; (c) it will worsen and not lessen the crime rate and gun violence in the area; (d) this area already has more than its fair share of social housing and high rise, low income apartment buildings; and, (e) the last thing it needs is another ill-conceived social housing project that adds to the population and burden without addressing the critical needs of the community.

The Report's conclusion that the proposal differs from other forms of assisted housing since it is supportive and transitional is unpersuasive. We all know that support for the vulnerable in this City (and Province) hardly amounts to much. Available evidence shows that those "supported" by the City (and Province) mostly live below poverty line, depend on food banks, and can hardly make ends meet. The waiting list for affordable housing in this City makes any notion of "transitional" housing laughable; such houses are usually transitional only in name. Even if we accept that the proposal would be truly "supportive and transitional", it still begs the question as to the wisdom of housing vulnerable women in a centre of despair and hopelessness ridden with gang and gun violence. Nor does it cure the democratic illegitimacy of imposing a project the community clearly does not want.

The Report attempts to justify its outrageous recommendation to site more social housing units in a neighbourhood that has about twice the City average for social housing by arguing that the percentage of RGI units in former North York has actually decreased to about 5.4%. But the relevant determination, which the report failed to make, was whether or not there was a decrease in the percentage of RGI units in the neighbourhood. Even if true, evidence of a decrease in percentage of RGI units in former North York, is no evidence of a decrease in this particular neighbourhood. It is well-known that generalized statistical percentages or averages are no evidence of generalized or equally shared burdens, benefits or sacrifices. The report is, therefore, misleading on this ground.

Planning laws and policies aimed at preventing ghettoization and/or (racial or class-based) segregation are reasonably justifiable in a democratic society and should withstand constitutional challenge under the Ontario Human Rights Code and the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. The purpose of such planning policies is **not** to prevent people from living where they want (which may be illegal) but to prevent City Planners from doing precisely what this Report recommends – wittingly creating underclass neighbourhoods and entrenching ghettoization and *de facto* segregation. The Report's conclusion that the former North York policy designed to ensure fair, equitable and even distribution of social housing contravenes the Code and the Charter is misconceived and erroneous. If valid, its logic undermines the underlying basis of the housing portion of this proposal, which also "addresses the characteristics of occupants of

housing” by targeting only young and single mothers, to the exclusion of young, single (parenting) fathers and older mothers and fathers in similar vulnerable situations.

The Report’s recommendation is mostly founded on misconceived and erroneous analyses or insufficient or misleading evidence. I urge you to reject it.

Your decision on this issue will reveal whether this Council truly understands the problems of the African Canadian community and the residents of the Jane/Sheppard neighbourhood and the factors that have led to the explosion of gang and gun violence, and the death of too many young Black men. The decision of this Council will go a long way to reveal whether this Council truly cares about solutions to these systemic problems.

The ACLC hopes that this Council will stand up for increased opportunity and support the community’s preference for the development of this site. We hope this Council will reject the plans to further entrench segregation under any guise.

Thank you.