

Wetaskiwin emergency shelter to close amidst community safety concerns; City continues to work toward long-term solution

For immediate release
February 20, 2020

(Wetaskiwin, Alberta) – At a special Council meeting held at 9 am on Thursday, Feb. 20, Wetaskiwin City Council voted to close the local emergency shelter earlier than planned due to a multitude of safety concerns brought forward by the community-at-large.

Originally slated to close March 31, 2020, Wetaskiwin's emergency shelter will now shut its doors as early as possible, pending negotiations with Lighthouse Fellowship who was contracted to manage the shelter. A recorded vote was requested along with the motion to close the shelter early, with Mayor Gandam and Councillors Billingsley and Lonsdale voting in favour of the motion, and Councillors Blatz-Morgan and Neilson opposing it. Councillors Hilgartner and Branco were absent from the meeting.

Following the motion to close the current emergency shelter, a second motion was made by Mayor Gandam directing Administration to identify funding opportunities for operating a permanent shelter with mental health and addictions supports outside of the downtown core before Dec. 1, 2020. That motion passed unanimously.

"Council recognizes that the emergency shelter was a band-aid solution, and that we still need to—and absolutely will—pursue funding to set up a permanent shelter that addresses our community's severe mental health and addictions issues," said Mayor Tyler Gandam. "We do, however, have a responsibility in ensuring the safety and well-being of all our citizens, which was being seriously jeopardized due to both the location of the shelter as well as the lack of adjoining counselling and treatment supports."

Approximately 50 community members attended the special Council meeting, with 21 individuals sharing their thoughts and experiences following the Chair's call to open the floor. While there was support for both options—closing the shelter or keeping it open but making changes to its operation—most of those who spoke recognized that additional supports were required to effectively address this complex issue, as well as the community's overall role in helping make that happen.

"It was truly heartening to have so many community members attend and speak at the meeting—especially with the short notice," said Mayor Gandam. "We remain in this together and will continue to find a way forward as a community."

About the City of Wetaskiwin

Wetaskiwin is a secure, connected, and inclusive community home to a diverse population of nearly 13,000 people. Located only 30 minutes south of the Edmonton International Airport, the City of Wetaskiwin provides a high quality of life through ample recreation opportunities, diverse cultural activities, and a modernized, business-friendly downtown.

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Backgrounder:

Wetaskiwin City Council and Administration opened the Wetaskiwin Emergency Shelter for the first time on February 5, 2019 after a period of extreme cold in the region. A \$40,000 provincial grant covered the cost of the shelter operation from Feb. 5, 2019 until April 1, 2019.

Wetaskiwin City Council then dedicated up to \$65,000 as part of the 2020 budget process to re-open the emergency shelter as of December 1, 2019—with it anticipated to close again on March 31, 2020.

A well-attended media tour of the Wetaskiwin Emergency Shelter was held on Monday, December 23, 2019. Mayor Tyler Gandam, Vinjelu Muyaba (Pastor, Lighthouse Church), and Lisa Saddleback (Shelter Manager) were interviewed by members of the media, stating that additional supports and resources were required from the province and other partners to help address these social issues.

Minister Rajan Sawhney toured the shelter earlier this month (February 2020) and indicated that she would try to secure funding to help address the systemic issues Wetaskiwin faces (re: homelessness, addictions, mental health supports, etc.). No provincial or partner dollars have been committed to this issue to-date.