

County considers policy for assisting refugee sponsors

By Tabitha Wells

The County of Dufferin is looking into developing a policy on providing assistance to groups seeking to sponsor refugees, following last Thursday's Council meeting. The decision was made following a third request for financial assistance by a local group.

Angus Murray and David Le Gallais of Project Safehaven made a presentation to County Council, asking for their support as well as any financial assistance they may be able to provide. Project Safehaven is made up of six local families, and is one of four groups of Orangeville residents that have come forward with plans to help resettle a Syrian family into the area.

"This is an opportunity for us to welcome newcomers to Orangeville," said Mr. Murray. "We had to commit as a group of six families to over \$30,000 to help this family. When my wife told me we were on the hook for \$6000, I gulped a bit. This is a legal, financial commitment. But then she pointed out that it is the right thing to do this."

The family Project Safehaven will be bringing to Orangeville is one that fled Syria two years ago, and has been living in Jordan in a refugee camp ever since. There, they stayed with another family in a small apartment. The parents have been unable to work, as Syrians are no longer entitled to work in Jordan, although their children have been able to attend school.

"They want a safe place to raise their children, for their children to be able to go to school, and for them to be able to work," said Mr. Murray. "What better place than Orangeville? This was not an easy commitment for us to make, but it was the right commitment to make."

Two other groups had previously approached County Council for assistance (one from Orangeville, one from Amaranth), and had been provided with a donation of \$1500. Project Safehaven requested the same amount, adding that they are also seeking general support from the community, and not just looking to the County for assistance.

Although Amaranth Mayor Don MacIver sought to utilize \$1500 from the discretionary fund of \$3000, that would not be possible, as that was the fund used to provide the amounts to the two previous groups.

"There is no urgency for them to receive the funds today, if their family won't be here until the spring," said Deputy Mayor Jane Aultman of Amaranth. "There is no reason we could not move a motion to bring this discussion forward to the 2016 budget."

Although Council did not appear completely opposed to the idea (nor did the two representatives of Project Safehaven), one concern brought up during the discussion was that there is no policy in place to deal with future requests, just the current precedent.

"From what I've heard, these are all private support groups," said Mono Deputy Mayor Ken McGhee. "We have a group on the First Line in Mono, calling themselves First Line. How do all the private groups in Dufferin have access to support in Dufferin? Are we doing this piece by piece, in a first-come, first-serve basis? Is there a process where people can know what is available and treats residents fairly?"

Melancthon Mayor Darren White was the first to suggest that an official policy needed to be developed, given the current situation.

"I think we have no choice but that we have to develop a policy to deal with this, and we have to make it a hard policy," said Mayor White. "We can't just keep giving the money to them as they come. We owe that much to both the Syrian Refugees and the taxpayers."

He added that the issue should be sent to either the General Government Services or Community Services committees, where staff and their council representatives could come up with such a policy.

"This is a humanitarian crisis of epic proportions not seen since the Second World War," he said. "We have a new government, and I'm thankful for some of the actions they're taking. From my point of view, I'm really disturbed by what many of our fellow Canadians are saying about this plan; I'm disturbed that we have become such an isolationist country on this issue, and I think we need to get back to our humanitarian roots."

Keith Palmer, the county's Director of Community Services, suggested that the onus be put on Community Services, as the Government already has a policy in place for the federal refugee program.

"There is both a federal refugee program, and refugees coming to Canada through private sponsorship groups, like the ones who have requested our help," he explained. "Federally sponsored refugees could be receiving finances provided through the Federal Government. Through private sponsorship, the onus is on the individuals or associated agency to provide funding."

Project Safehaven has already managed to raise \$10,000 of the \$30,000 needed, and added that they have been speaking with the other groups, including the Headwaters Refugee Sponsorship Council, to learn more and work together where they can.

"We are also getting great support from local citizens as well," said Mr. Le Gallais. "It's been a strong community effort, and we're thankful for that."

Mr. Murray added that part of the reason Project Safehaven was hoping for support from the County is that with the local government backing them, people might be more willing to come forward and help.

"We're looking for more financial support, but the key part is that support will lead to more fundraising for this family," said Mr. Murray. "For some residents who aren't sure about helping and are sitting on the fence, seeing the County support this can help them want to be a part of it too."

A motion was introduced to refer the policy issue to Community Services to develop a procedure to follow in the future.

After the motion was approved, outgoing warden Warren Maycock, moved that in the meantime, County Council should move forward with the group's request.

"A precedent has been set, and I think we should tell them that we will provide funds, as we did provide the amount to two groups already," he said.

His suggestion was to take the \$1500 out of the 2015 Warden's expense account, as during his time as Warden, he had only claimed around \$500 in expenses.

That motion also carried.

Once the idea has been discussed at the County's Community Services meetings, a draft procedure will be brought back to Council for their consideration.