

City Council Report

REPORT NUMBER 110-2026-Growth-Strategy & Engagement

DATE

PREPARED

February 11, 2026

FILE

**CITY COUNCIL
MEETING DATE**

February 17, 2026

SUBJECT

Guiding Criteria for Designated Encampment Sites – City Council

RECOMMENDATION TO CITY COUNCIL

WITH RESPECT to Report 110-2026, we recommend that the Guiding Criteria as outlined in this report be approved;

AND THAT Administration identify options for designated encampment sites in alignment with Distance Guidelines and Guiding Criteria, recognizing not all criteria may be achievable;

AND THAT Administration report back to the Quality of Life Standing Committee with consultation results and three recommended sites prior to presentation to City Council;

AND THAT any necessary by-laws be presented to City Council for ratification.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report advances Item 5 of the 10-Part Enhanced Encampment Response Plan (10-Part Plan), which directs Administration to identify up to three designated encampment sites in accordance with Council-approved Distance Guidelines and in collaboration with community partners, Indigenous leadership, and people with lived and living experience.

In April 2024, Council directed Administration to pursue a designated encampment approach. In July 2024, Council approved Distance Guidelines to support implementation. While the Distance Guidelines establish spatial parameters, they do not address all operational considerations. Further, the legal landscape regarding appropriate Distance Guidelines continues to evolve, with an important decision (*Heegsma v. Hamilton (City)*) before the Ontario Court of Appeal pending, after completion of a two-day hearing on February 10th and 11th, 2026.

The proposed Guiding Criteria address site size, operational access, land-use compatibility, proximity to services, service feasibility (including sanitation and potable water), year-round

operability, and accessibility. Together, the Distance Guidelines and Guiding Criteria provide a structured but flexible framework for site selection.

The Guiding Criteria are informed by extensive consultation undertaken in 2024 and reinforced through additional engagement in 2025. Across both phases, consistent themes emerged, including the importance of access to services and transportation, emergency and operational access, compatibility with surrounding land uses, provision of basic infrastructure, and safety and dignity for encampment residents and the broader community.

Consistent with the 10-Part Plan, Administration will bring forward one recommended site in the North Core, one in the South Core, and a third site that may be located outside the Urban Cores but not in a rural area. A broader list of assessed sites will also be provided.

Subject to Council approval of the Guiding Criteria, Administration will proceed with site identification and consultation, with the intent of returning to Committee and Council with recommendations in advance of the anticipated conclusion of overflow winter shelter capacity on April 30, 2026.

DISCUSSION

Implementation Context

In April 2024, Council considered the feasibility of designated and sanctioned encampments through [Corporate Report 137-2024](#), resulting in direction to pursue a designated encampment approach due to its feasibility and alignment with municipal responsibilities and fiscal capacity. Subsequently, in July 2024, Council approved Distance Guidelines (See Attachment A – 2024 Approved Distance Guidelines) to operationalize this approach.

In October 2024, City Council adopted the *10-Part Enhanced Encampment Response Plan* (10-Part Plan) to take a more cohesive response to addressing unsheltered homelessness, with the ultimate goal of improving the health and safety of encampments, providing a pathway into services and housing, and reducing strain on community partners, encampment residents and the public.

This report responds to *Item 5 – Identify options for designated encampment locations within Urban Cores* of the 10-Part Plan, which states:

In collaboration with community partners, people with lived and living experience, and Indigenous leaders and representative organizations, and in accordance with the Distance Guidelines, up to three designated encampment areas with essential services are identified, reducing the strain on community partners and Administration, and leading to improved outcomes for encampment residents (pg. 5).

While potential locations could be identified based solely on Council-approved Distance Guidelines, experience has demonstrated that distance alone is insufficient to address key

operational, safety, environmental, and service-delivery considerations. The application of clear Guiding Criteria alongside the Distance Guidelines provides a more comprehensive and practical framework for identifying designated encampment sites that are safer, serviceable, and manageable over time.

Consistent with the direction set out in the 10-Part Plan to identify options within the Urban Cores, Administration will recommend one site in the North Core, one site in the South Core, and a third site that may be located outside of the Urban Cores but not in a rural area due to service delivery, accessibility, and operational constraints.

The legal landscape regarding appropriate Distance Guidelines continues to evolve, with an important decision (*Heegsma v. Hamilton (City)*) before the Ontario Court of Appeal pending, after completion of a two-day hearing on February 10th and 11th, 2026.

Guiding Criteria for Designated Encampment Sites

In addition to the City's existing Distance Guidelines, the following guiding criteria are proposed to be used to inform the identification of potential designated encampment sites, recognizing that not all criteria may be applicable or achievable in every location.

- **Minimum site size:** Ideally, at least one usable acre to allow for appropriate spacing, safety requirements, and access for services and emergency response.
- **Established use:** Preference for locations with encampment activity to avoid introducing encampments into new areas.
- **Emergency and operational access:** Adequate access for emergency responders, sanitation and garbage services, outreach vehicles, and snow clearing operations.
- **Land-use compatibility:** Exclusion of spaces with regular permitted, programmed, or revenue-generating uses, including parks with active City-led or contracted programming.
- **Proximity to services:** Reasonable walking distance (approximately 1.5 km or less) to public transportation or essential health and social services.
- **Service feasibility:** Ability to provide and maintain basic services such as portable toilets and regular servicing, garbage collection, potable water access, and outreach support.
- **Year-round operability:** Sites should be capable of operating safely in all seasons, including winter conditions.
- **Accessibility:** A minimum of two sites should reasonably support accessibility considerations such as the presence of gravel or paved surfaces, recognizing that full accessibility may not be achievable in all locations.

The Guiding Criteria were developed through a community safety and well-being lens, with the intent of balancing the safety and dignity of encampment residents with the safety of service providers, emergency responders, and the broader community.

Impacts on surrounding areas and neighbourhoods were a primary consideration in the development of the Distance Guidelines. As the Distance Guidelines will be applied in tandem with the Guiding Criteria, these considerations are already embedded within the overall site-selection framework and therefore are not repeated as a standalone criterion.

Emerging Trends

Historically, camping trailers and vehicle-based living have been limited within the community. More recently, however, Administration has observed a noticeable increase in individuals sheltering in vehicles and trailers. While the three designated encampment sites are intended to address tent-based encampments, Administration recognizes that vehicle-based living presents distinct spatial, safety, and servicing considerations.

As such, there may be a future need to explore a designated location specifically suited to vehicle-based sheltering. Administration will continue to monitor trends and operational pressures and will report back to Council should this additional need arise. This report does not seek approval for an additional site. Any future recommendations related to vehicle-based living would be brought forward separately for Council's consideration.

Next Steps

Subject to City Council's approval of the Guiding Criteria, Administration will identify potential options and undertake site-specific consultation. Results, along with three recommended designated encampment sites and a list of other sites that were considered but not recommended, will be presented to the Quality of Life Standing Committee for endorsement before being presented to City Council for its consideration.

This timeline is informed by the anticipated conclusion of overflow winter shelter capacity on April 30, 2026. Confirming designated encampment sites in advance of this date will support proactive communication with individuals experiencing homelessness and enable coordinated planning among service providers and partner organizations.

CONSULTATION

2024 Consultation

The proposed Guiding Criteria are informed by consultation undertaken in 2024, as detailed in Corporate Report 137-2024. Consultation included a public survey and targeted sessions with Indigenous leaders, people with lived and living experience, community partners, service providers, and representatives from the business community. In total, these efforts generated more than 1,250 points of feedback. Results directly informed the development of the proposed Guiding Criteria as outlined below.

Access to Services and Transportation

Survey respondents ranked proximity to health and social services and public transportation among the highest priorities when considering potential designated encampment location.

This is reflected in the criterion:

- Proximity to services: Reasonable walking distance (approximately 1.5 km or less) to public transportation or essential health and social services.

Operational Feasibility and Service Provision

Consultation participants identified the importance of providing basic infrastructure and ensuring that sites could be safely serviced and maintained. Feedback referenced sanitation, garbage collection, potable water access, emergency response access, outreach access, and winter maintenance.

These considerations are reflected in the criteria:

- Emergency and operational access: Adequate access for emergency responders, sanitation and garbage services, outreach vehicles, and snow clearing operations.
- Service feasibility: Ability to provide and maintain basic services such as portable toilets and regular servicing, garbage collection, potable water access, and outreach support.
- Year-round operability: Sites should be capable of operating safely in all seasons, including winter conditions.

Reducing Potential Conflict

Consultation results indicated stronger agreement with the use of vacant lots and open spaces, and strong disagreement with the use of parks with active programming or heavily used public spaces. Participants also identified concerns related to compatibility with surrounding land uses.

This is reflected in the criteria:

- Land-use compatibility: Exclusion of spaces with regular permitted, programmed, or revenue-generating uses, including parks with active City-led or contracted programming.
- Established use: Preference for locations with encampment activity to avoid introducing encampments into new areas.

Safety and Dignity

Safety considerations for encampment residents, service providers, and the broader community were consistently identified. Participants also referenced the importance of manageable site size and appropriate spacing.

This is reflected in:

- Minimum site size: Ideally, at least one usable acre to allow for appropriate spacing, safety requirements, and access for services and emergency response.
- Accessibility: A minimum of two sites should reasonably support accessibility considerations such as the presence of gravel or paved surfaces, recognizing that full accessibility may not be achievable in all locations.

The proposed Guiding Criteria therefore reflect the key themes identified through the 2024 consultation process by translating the priorities expressed through engagement into practical site-selection considerations.

2025 Consultation

In alignment with the 10-Part Action Plan's direction to collaborate with community partners, people with lived and living experience, and Indigenous leaders and representative organizations on designated sites, Administration engaged with the stakeholders below in December 2025:

- 50 people with lived and living experience of encampments;
- 33 front-line workers participating in the local Outreach Workers Network; and
- 18 community partners, including Indigenous leaders and representative organizations, involved in direct encampment-related service delivery ;

Feedback gathered through the 2025 engagement broadly reinforced the findings from 2024. Participants continued to emphasize:

- The importance of proximity to services and public transportation;
- The need for reliable access to sanitation, garbage collection, potable water, and outreach supports;
- The importance of emergency and operational access, including winter maintenance considerations;
- The need to ensure sites are compatible with surrounding land uses and avoid locations with active programming or high competing public use; and
- The importance of safety, dignity, and manageable site size.

Overall, the 2025 consultation did not introduce new or conflicting priorities. Rather, it confirmed and strengthened the themes identified in 2024, providing further validation that the proposed Guiding Criteria are aligned with stakeholder input and operational realities.

Quality of Life Standing Committee

On February 10, 2026, Corporate Report 047-2026 was presented to the Quality of Life Standing Committee seeking feedback on the proposed Guiding Criteria for identifying designated encampment sites and requesting support to proceed with site identification and

the next phase of consultation. The report was subsequently referred back to Administration to be re-presented at a future City Council meeting.

During Committee discussion, members raised questions and considerations in the following areas:

1. Flexibility of the framework and sufficiency of available land
2. Fire safety, electrical safety, and emergency access
3. Clear sightlines and site layout
4. Potable water and public health considerations
5. Winter conditions and heat sources
6. Community consultation
7. Learning from other municipal approaches

Administration's responses on how feedback is being addressed are outlined below.

1. Flexibility of the Framework and Land Availability

Members questioned whether sufficient land exists that would satisfy both the Council-approved Distance Guidelines and the proposed Guiding Criteria.

Administration advised that both the Distance Guidelines and the Guiding Criteria are intended to guide site identification rather than operate as absolute requirements. They provide a structured framework for assessment while allowing reasonable flexibility where appropriate. Based on preliminary review and analysis, Administration advised that viable site recommendations can be brought forward that reasonably align with both frameworks.

Members also expressed interest in reviewing a more exhaustive list of potential locations rather than only the three recommended sites. Administration will provide a broader inventory of assessed sites, including those considered but not recommended, in a future report.

2. Fire Safety, Electrical Safety, and Emergency Access

Concerns related to fire risk, electrical safety, and emergency response access are addressed through the following criteria:

- Minimum site size; and
- Emergency and operational access.

These criteria support appropriate spacing between structures, safe emergency vehicle access, and the ability to respond effectively to fire or other safety incidents.

Thunder Bay Fire Rescue currently assesses encampment sites for fire safety risks and provides guidance where required. This practice will continue for any designated sites to support fire prevention, emergency planning, and risk mitigation.

Administration will explore enhanced spacing standards that provide clear delineation between individual tents to support fire mitigation, emergency access, safety, and privacy considerations.

3. Clear Sightlines and Site Layout

Members emphasized the importance of maintaining clear sightlines within designated sites.

Clear sightlines are considered under:

- Emergency and operational access
- Service feasibility

These criteria require that sites are capable of being safely accessed and serviced. In practical terms, this includes ensuring unobstructed pathways for emergency responders and service providers, visibility across common areas where appropriate, and layouts that reduce hidden or inaccessible areas that may present safety risks.

4. Potable Water and Public Health Considerations

Concerns related to potable water access and broader public health risks are addressed by the following criteria:

- Service feasibility
- Emergency and operational access; and
- Year-round operability.

Access to potable water does not inherently require permanent physical infrastructure. Servicing approaches may include water delivery through trucks, refillable jugs, or other temporary measures.

5. Winter Conditions and Heat Sources

Committee discussion referenced winter heat sources and the associated fire and safety risks. The provision and regulation of safe heat sources during winter months presents operational challenges that Administration will continue to explore in consultation with Thunder Bay Fire Rescue and community partners.

These considerations are captured under the Year-round operability criterion, which requires that sites be capable of operating safely in all seasons, including winter conditions.

6. Community Consultation

Members emphasized the importance of continued community consultation.

In addition to the extensive consultation already undertaken and described in this report, Administration intends to conduct further site-specific consultation once potential locations have been identified. This next phase will provide an opportunity for community members to provide input prior to final site recommendations being brought forward.

7. Learning from Other Municipal Approaches

Committee members encouraged Administration to review and learn from approaches implemented by other municipalities following a similar approach. Administration will continue to monitor emerging practices, operational models, and risk mitigation strategies.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATION

Designated encampment sites can be implemented within existing resources; however, achieving voluntary uptake may require additional investments to support site safety and functionality, and responsiveness to resident needs. Should such enhancements be identified, Administration will report back to Council with options and seek direction.

BACKGROUND

February 10, 2026, Corporate Report 047-2026 from R. Willianen, Supervisor – Encampment Response was presented seeking feedback from the Quality of Life Standing Committee on guiding criteria for identifying designated encampment sites, and requesting support for proceeding with site identification and the next phase of consultation. The report was referred back to Administration to be re-presented at a future City Council meeting.

October 21, 2024, Corporate Report 384-2024 from C. Olsen, Director Strategy & Engagement was represented and recommended that the Human Rights-Based Community Action Plan be approved, and that a copy of the resolution be sent to the Office of the Federal Housing Advocate, and provincial and federal members of parliament.

October 7, 2024, Corporate Report 384-2024 from C. Olsen, Director Strategy & Engagement was presented as a first report and proposed an enhanced encampment response through a ten-part Human Rights-Based Community Action Plan.

August 12, 2024, Corporate Report 312-2024 from R. Willianen, Policy & Research Analyst and C. Olsen, Director Strategy & Engagement was presented and recommended to Council that the encampment distance guidelines for trails, sidewalks, parking lots and bridges remain at 5 metres, and that they be included in the overall Distance Guidelines that were approved and ratified on July 15, 2024.

July 15, 2024, Memorandum dated July 5, 2024, from C. Olsen, Director Strategy & Engagement was presented and proposed amended distance guidelines to include 20 metres away from private non-residential property and 5 metres away from rivers and railway

tracks as they were not originally reflected. The final recommendation as presented in the memorandum was approved and ratified.

June 24, 2024, Corporate Report 252-2024 from R. Willianen, Policy & Research Analyst and C. Olsen, Director Strategy & Engagement was presented to Committee of the Whole and provided recommendations related to adopting distance guidelines, and advocacy items to other orders of government related to encampments and unsheltered homelessness.

May 6, 2024, Council directed that the City conduct an environmental scan of municipal approaches to designated and sanctioned sites, undertake an assessment of recommendations to municipalities by the Office of the Federal Housing Advocate, update the Encampment Response Protocol, further define designated encampments for the City, and continue to coordinate a human-rights based encampment response.

April 22, 2024, Corporate Report 137-2024 from C. Olsen, Director – Strategy & Engagement and R. Willianen, Policy & Research Analyst, was presented to Committee of the Whole and provided an update on the feasibility of designated encampment locations, including community consultation results.

REFERENCE MATERIAL ATTACHED

Attachment A – 2024 Approved Distance Guidelines

REPORT PREPARED BY

Rilee Willianen, Supervisor – Encampment Response – Growth

REPORT SIGNED AND VERIFIED BY

Kerri Marshall, Commissioner - Growth

Date (02/13/2026)