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City News for Tuesday, January 30, 2007

House of Prayer planned for Whitehouse could run afoul of city's zoning bylaw

By **Donal O'Connor**
Staff reporter

A "House of Prayer" intended to promote civic unity could be a source of contention among neighbours in the residential neighbourhood where it's to be held.

A number of church leaders and Christian lay persons have initiated, under the name Stratford House of Prayer, a round-the-clock prayer month in February.

The group is inviting all citizens to "share in a time of prayerful unity for the blessing of God upon our city."

The prayer house, however, is to be located at the controversial Whitehouse at 265 St. David St. The property has been the subject of an Ontario Municipal Board hearing concerning its owners' plan to use it for banquets and receptions.

The prayer use planned for the property doesn't conform to its residential zoning, said city planning director Barbara Dembek. "A prayer meeting house is not accessory to a single-family dwelling."

Asked how he feels about the location, Mayor Dan Mathieson said: "Is it an ideal location? No. Did we give them lots of options? Yes."

But he said he doesn't see use of the house for community prayer for one month as being a problem.

At its Jan. 22 meeting, city council unanimously supported the community prayer concept and endorsed a proclamation for the month of prayer. At the time, however, a specific location had not been identified for council.

A dedicated group of Christian believers is setting up the prayer house, said spokesman David Straatsma in a media release.

"In a world where the issues of social justice, environmental stewardship and public integrity are

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continually brought to our attention, a need has been recognized,” he said.

The prayer house is based on a movement taking hold in North America and Europe where prayer vigils referred to as 24/7s have been established.

People from Stratford and area are being invited to converge on the St. David Street residence for round-the-clock prayer.

The premises will offer a variety of features to appeal to all faith traditions, and opportunities to pray for public needs will be posted and will provide a chance for people to pray for elected officials and community institutions.

“A ‘wailing wall’ where those who are hurting personally can bring their needs to communal prayer, will be available. Opportunities for worship and expression or visual arts expression will be there as well,” said Mr. Straatsma.

The focus of prayer will be for Stratford and region’s elected officials, institutions, social and economic needs as well as for individual needs and the needs of loved ones.

“The Stratford House Of Prayer will be a place where anyone can come to draw closer to God and deepen their relationship with Jesus Christ,” said Mr. Straatsma.

Organizers are asking visitors to sign up for prayer times. Sign up times can be arranged at schedule@stratfordhouseofprayer.org or by phoning Bev Leclair at 273-0641.

Ms. Leclair said the steering group looked all over for a facility that would serve well for the purpose. The Whitehouse, she said, “was just the best place.”

“We don’t want it tagged as a denominational thing.”

Maria Walsh, also an organizer of the prayer event, explained the prayer movement known as 24/7 began in 1999 in Kansas City but she said there are movements in England and Europe as well and all denominations have been involved.

“It’s really God initiated — it’s a sharing that’s been happening all over the world.”

The majority of churches in Stratford are supporting it, she said.

People have also been circulating the book *Red Moon Rising* by English author Peter Grier.

To respond to this story contact City Editor [Larke Turnbull](#) or submit a [letter to the editor](#).

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