

June 16, 2021

Statement to Newmarket Council:

There is still time for the Council to rethink its approach to regulating massage businesses in Newmarket. It is overwhelmingly clear that several speakers here today do not agree with the direction the Council is heading. Please listen to us and recognize the harm that will be caused by such a restrictive bylaw, particularly for working class Asian migrant massage workers. They too are part of the Newmarket community.

It is clear that one of the drivers of revisiting this bylaw was concern over alleged human trafficking taking place. Yet in the Council's last meeting it was revealed that York Regional Police indicated that they have no evidence of trafficking occurring at massage parlors in Newmarket. Despite this, the Council appears to have now shifted to justifying reforms with the aim to 'drive sex work out of the town,' 'protect reputable businesses,' and 'uphold town values.' As an international anti-trafficking organization, Freedom United is alarmed at how the fear of trafficking — which apparently is a non-existent problem — opened the door to ultimately targeting the livelihoods of marginalized members of your own community.

Even if Newmarket aims to prevent human trafficking, this restrictive approach is absolutely not the path to take. In the Council's last meeting you spoke about the risks of driving sex work underground and Freedom United explained that sex trafficking is different from consensual sex work. From an evidence-based perspective, pushing sex work into the shadows puts sex workers in less safe conditions and isolates the minority of those who are trafficked or facing violence, making it harder for them to access support. That will be an effect of a restrictive bylaw.

To this point, we ask the Council about the implications of having police vet all business licensing applications for 'criminal activity' — does this mean applicants will be screened for engaging in sex work or having their immigration status investigated?

Lastly, we ask that you put yourselves in the place of the Asian massage workers in Newmarket. It's clear that this licensing regime is putting the heaviest burden on them, making it more difficult for them to earn a living. We urge you to center their concerns today and reflect on the harm posed by the bylaw before you.

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