

Groups encouraged to get involved to help Aurora secure 'Youth Friendly' designation

By Brock Weir

Community groups throughout Aurora operate programs geared towards kids and teens through various ways, but getting on the same page in ensuring the needs of local teens are met will help Aurora secure a second designation as a 'Youth Friendly' community.

This Tuesday, March 27, the Town will hold the first of two information sessions for community groups and organizations on how they can get involved with Aurora's application in the Youth Friendly Communities recognition program.

The program celebrates communities that recognize adolescents have different needs for play and activities than kids and adults, and the public session is intended to help groups work together as Aurora re-applies for the designation, which it first secured in 2016.

'We received silver designation in 2016 and a large part of that is the different play opportunities in Town - not just us, but any play provider in Aurora offering programs for youth,' says Julie Stephenson, Youth Programmer for the Town of Aurora. 'The [first designation] have actually done a great deal for us in terms of offering the programs they offer, but now as we get ready to reapply in 2019 we're really looking to make sure we're representing them correctly, we know what programs they offer, if they have any updates, and learn directly from them what information they have that can benefit this application.'

Part of Tuesday's session - and a second session is scheduled for Wednesday - will include a presentation on Play Works, provider of the designation, and the criteria Aurora will need to meet in order for a second certification.

'When we talk to the organizations, we're looking for not only the programs they offer, but anything that is part of their normal operating procedures that makes them a youth friendly organization,' says Ms. Stephenson. 'It could be anything from how they communicate with youth promoting their programs and that sort of face to face contact when they are operating their programs. It could be any policies or procedures that are put in place to really recognize the developmental needs of youth at that age and, in those programs, and it could even be how they support the community.'

A designation such as this, she says, is important in showcasing the work that is done for youth within Aurora, along with the opportunities provided, as well as a way of seeing how Aurora measures up to other communities.

'One of the greatest results of doing this application is we get to highlight so many things in the community for youth themselves,' she says. 'We sometimes have youth who say, 'We had no idea there was this program, I had no idea I could apply for this scholarship,' and this is a great way to highlight what is available for youth. There are a wide variety of opportunities and what is really great is you've seen in the last little while youth standing up and asking for an opportunity. There seems to be something that pops up to meet that need.'

'One of the best examples I really love is our Youth Engagement Committee. We had a group of youth go to Aurora Town Council and let them know that they were interested in the opportunity and really wanted to get involved. Here we are today, I think we're four or five years into that and it is a thriving committee that is involved in youth issues. You really need to have a youth voice present, not only in their community but in this application.'

'We have already started the process, running a few focus groups throughout the year on different topics, that our youth committee has identified as points of interest. We have run a health and wellness as well as an employment and life after high school session. Coming up in April, we have a transit and accessibility focus group, then we will also be releasing a survey we hope to make annual to the youth of Aurora and that should happen in the summer.'

The Youth Friendly Communities Information Sessions will take place Tuesday, March 27, at 1 p.m. at the Aurora Family Leisure Complex, and again on Wednesday, March 28, at 6 p.m. in the same location. Both meetings will take place on Program Room C on the second floor. For more information, and to RSVP, email youth@aurora.ca.