

Doug Steele named Aurora's 2026 Citizen of the Year

At a time when food insecurity has left so many wondering where to turn, Doug Steele has been a difference-maker.

The former Executive Director of Welcoming Arms, an ecumenical organization founded to help local community members make ends meet and provide fellowship over a meal, was named Aurora's 2026 Citizen of the Year on Monday night as part of the Town's annual Community Recognition Awards.

"Tonight, we recognize someone who, for more than two decades, has quietly and consistently made Aurora a more compassionate place to live," said Mayor Tom Mrakas, before revealing the name of this year's honouree. "This individual first began making a significant impact in our community by joining the parent council at Light of Christ Catholic Elementary School here in Aurora. During his time there, he participated actively and served as Chair for several years, helping guide initiatives that supported students, families, and the broader school community. But just like many of our most celebrated volunteers, this individual's efforts to give back ? to improve the lives of others ? didn't stop there.

"He joined Welcoming Arms ? our wonderful community organization that supports vulnerable residents through food programs, practical assistance and care ? starting off first as a humble volunteer dishwasher. And it was very clear quickly that he was a natural leader, and during the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, he stepped into the role of Acting Executive Director. What's also incredibly noteworthy is he declined a salary in this position, choosing instead to ensure that resources remained focused on supporting the organization's mission and the individuals it serves. That decision alone speaks volumes about the kind of person he is ? someone motivated not by recognition or reward, but by a genuine desire to help others."

Steele's work with Welcoming Arms continues, Mayor Mrakas noted, through his service as Chair of its Board of Directors, and well as his contribution to the church community that helped lay the groundwork for the organization as a weekly liturgical lector at Our Lady of Grace Catholic Church.

He's also a member of the Aurora Cares Community Action Team which works to identify the needs of vulnerable and at-risk community members and strives to address those needs.

"The truth is that this is only a snapshot of the countless ways this individual has supported, uplifted, and strengthened our community over the years," Mayor Mrakas continued. "What makes his contributions so remarkable is not just the amount of time he has given, but the humility, kindness, and genuine care for others that have defined every act of service. Simply put, Aurora is a better, kinder, and more connected community because of his quiet leadership and unwavering commitment to others."

Among the community members who put Steele's name forward for Citizen of the Year was incumbent Welcoming Arms Executive Director Sally Freitas, who said "few individuals embody the spirit of community, service, and selfless leadership as completely as he does."

"As Chair of two non-profit organizations in Aurora, Doug has demonstrated exceptional dedication and steady leadership," she said. "He not only fulfills the responsibilities of those roles, but consistently goes above and beyond them. His ability to organize, inspire, and mobilize others has strengthened our community in lasting ways. During the COVID-19 pandemic, his leadership was especially impactful. At a time when uncertainty and isolation weighed heavily on so many, he ensured that our organization remained active, responsive, and connected. His calm determination and thoughtful coordination helped us continue serving those who depended on us most.

"What truly sets Doug apart is his unwavering commitment to looking out for those in need. His community-minded outlook is not occasional or situational ? it is a daily practice. He consistently offers his time, energy, and resources without hesitation, and he does so with good nature, humility and a smile. In every sense, Doug exemplifies what it means to be Citizen of the Year. His leadership, compassion, and tireless service have made a meaningful difference in the lives of so many, and our community is stronger because

of him.?

Previous Aurora Citizens of the Year were also eager to sing his praises, including Vern Cunningham and Barb Allen.

?His service has been across all religious affiliations supporting everyone ? a true Aurora citizen,? said Cunningham, who has worked with Steele through the Aurora Whisky Society.

Added Allen: ?Doug and I both joined the Executive Council (EC) of Welcoming Arms on the same day. Doug then agreed to be Chair of our EC in 2019. Shortly after becoming Chair, COVID arrived and our ED left her position! As was the case for all organizations during COVID, Welcoming Arms had to pivot ? and quickly. With Doug's strong leadership, we got all three of our programs (Welcome Table, Martha's Table, and Bridging the Gap) up and running, in various modified forms. Doug took on many of the roles that our ED would have done, including fundraising, sitting on every committee, dealing with our finances, connecting with the community, and being the face of Welcoming Arms.

?Doug is a valuable Aurora citizen who makes a difference in the lives of our more vulnerable citizens.?

By Brock WeirEditorLocal Journalism Initiative Reporter