

Faced with funding shortage, senior driving service seeks support

By Brock Weir

Faced with a future funding shortage, a non-profit organization dedicated to providing safe and affordable transportation for seniors in York Region is looking for support.

For over 30 years, the Sutton-based Routes Connecting Communities organization has been helping people get where they need to go, improving access to both basic needs and special destinations, including here in Aurora.

Partially funded by the Aurora-based CHATS (Community & Home Assistance to Seniors), Routes also receives funding from the Region of York and the Ontario Trillium Foundation. With the latter two funding sources set to dry up at the end of this year, as well as just one volunteer driver serving the Aurora area, Routes is looking for some help to keep the community moving.

"We have been around for 30 years and we provide timely, safe and affordable transportation, as well as a caring conversation along the way," said Danielle Koren, Executive Director of Routes. "Our volunteer drivers use their own personal vehicles to take our clients to destinations within, as well as outside York Region for medical, social, banking or recreational purposes and activities of daily living requirements. We also offer bus trips to shopping centres, local special events and attractions, and these trips are aimed at reducing social isolation."

In 2018, Routes carried out more than 15,135 rides for 7,283 riders. They saw a 38 per cent growth in their service, provided by just 43 volunteer drivers.

With Routes, a client can reimburse a driver for their mileage (set at 47 cents per kilometre) or their office can bill a third-party organization like ODSP or an insurance company for their cost. Clients can also apply for fee subsidy assistance if they are truly low income.

In addition to this, Routes provides free rides to food pantries and community meal programs.

"We believe that if people don't have the funds to buy food, they don't have the funds to get to the food," said Ms. Koren. "We actually do some rides for the Aurora Food Pantry and it is all free of charge."

"Our clients are our neighbours. They are experiencing social, physical, mental and/or financial barriers to timely, safe and compassionate transportation. Those people cannot take YRT for whatever reason and they cannot afford a regular taxi service. Although most of our clients live in Georgina because it is the most rural municipality (in York Region), we also have clients in Aurora."

With their funding from the Region and Trillium set to come to a close, Ms. Koren said Routes is currently looking at opportunities for outreach.

They will have a presence at the June 2 Aurora Chamber Street Festival, for instance.

They are also looking for organizations to partner with and even corporate connections for businesses that might be interested in sponsoring rides to food pantries or additional rides for low income residents.

“Most importantly, we're looking at volunteer drivers,” she said. “Right now, we have one volunteer driver in Aurora and we need more. Maybe there are realtors who are looking for opportunities to give back to their community and they may be willing to sponsor rides.”

For more information on Routes Connecting Communities, how to become a client, volunteer as a driver, or provide support or sponsorship to the program, visit routescc.org, email info@routescc.org, or call 905-722-4616.