

Fall signals a busy season for Aurora's Neighbourhood Network



By Brock Weir

The crispness of fall has blown in for the season and with it has come one of the busiest seasons for Aurora's Neighbourhood Network.

The local volunteer organization hosted by Magna for the Community and founded by Belinda Stronach fanned out to collect thousands of pounds of food throughout northern York Region this past Saturday for their annual food drive.

Each October, volunteers station themselves at grocery stores across the communities Neighbourhood Network serves ? Aurora, King, Newmarket, East Gwillimbury and Georgina ? to collect food and cash donations for local food banks ? in Aurora's case, the Aurora Food Pantry.

Volunteers were on hand to collect donations at Centra Foods at Yonge and Orchard Heights, Metro at Yonge and Henderson Drive, Real Canadian Superstore at St. John's Sideroad and Bayview Avenue, Sobeys at Bayview and Hollidge Boulevard, as well as Walmart from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m.

The aim of the program is not only to support local food banks, but also to offer ?a hands-on volunteer experience for students, families and businesses? while raising awareness of food security issues locally.

?Each year, thousands of pounds of food and hundreds of dollars are collected by volunteers for the Aurora Food Pantry,? said Neighbourhood Network Ambassador Tim Jones who, in his capacity as a former mayor of the Town of Aurora, was honoured earlier in the week through the formal dedication of the Tim Jones Trail at the northern end of Aurora's leg of the Nokiidaa Trail.

When Mr. Jones and Erin Cerenzia plugged the food drive at Council recently, the fourfold approach of the initiative raised the interest of Councillor Wendy Gaertner, who questioned whether Neighbourhood Network has considered upping the ante on raising awareness of these food security issues by formally lobbying governments on the matter ?on behalf of low-income residents.?

Although Mr. Jones said Neighbourhood Network is not in the ?lobbying business,? it is something he would support.

?We strictly keep our business to volunteering, getting volunteers to come out, and working with our Food Pantry,? said Mr. Jones. ?I was over there last week to ensure everything is in place for the Food Drive and if the Food Pantry wants to lobby, I would personally support them, but as an organization we are non-profit and we should stick to the volunteering side of things.?

Evidently they have a winning formula in doing so.

Since the organization was founded by Ms. Stronach in her capacity as Member of Parliament in 2008, Neighbourhood Network has since grown to include 300 registered partners across their municipalities offering volunteer opportunities to people of all ages.

According to Ms. Cerenzia, they currently have over 8,000 registered community volunteers in their database.

?These volunteers come from a wide range of demographics in the community,? she said. ?We have our high school students who are out to get those 40 community involvement hours, but we also have families, businesses and their employees, and even seniors who we see active and engaging with us to get out in the community and volunteering.?

Once the food and dollar donations have been collected and distributed to the food banks this weekend, there is little time to rest.

Attentions are also turning to rolling out their annual Winter Snow Removal Program, which matches a senior or a person with a disability with volunteer snow shovellers living no further than 10 minutes away.

?When there is a significant amount of snowfall, that volunteer goes out and shovels paths so an individual can leave their house,? said Ms. Cerenzia. ?We have helped dozens and dozens of seniors and persons with disabilities from being trapped in their homes over the winter.?

Also moving onto the front burner is their annual Holiday Gift Drive, which will soon begin collecting gifts and monetary donations for Neighbourhood Network partners based on their highest identified needs.

?The highest need is really important because we interact with these 300 partners and we get tremendous donations coming in, but they might be lacking in socks, which is something so basic to us,? explained Ms. Cerenzia. ?They tell us and we distribute all the donations according to what those needs are.?

For more information on how to become involved with the Snow Removal Program, Holiday Gift Drive, or any number of volunteer opportunities in the community, visit www.neighbourhoodnetwork.org.