

Grassroots campaign aims for a Straw-Free Aurora



By Brock Weir

They say it was that one straw that broke the camel's back.

That might not be the case, but with increasing frequency we see straws and other forms of plastic washing up on our beaches, getting caught on the banks of our rivers, streams and creeks, and, most problematic of all, being pulled out the bodies of marine life that call these habitats home.

It's a big problem, but one local group is taking the first steps in making a big difference by envisioning a Straw Free Aurora.

Straw Free Aurora is a grassroots initiative started by community members living in Aurora's Heritage Conservation District. This small but very active group has been a strong presence at events throughout our community, armed with clipboards, dedicated to raising awareness of the issue and collecting signatures to keep momentum going.

To date, they have collected nearly 1,000 signatures from Aurora residents and show no signs of slowing down, hoping to take their petition to Council next month for some serious consideration from lawmakers who can make a Straw Free Aurora a reality.

“It is important to us for the future of our children,” says Ariana Dalie of why she got involved in the initiative. “It is important for us to be an example to our children to act when something matters to us. Plastic pollution is a huge issue currently and we decided to take on a small initiative, which is the use of plastic straws, and see how we can raise awareness and hopefully make some change.”

This is a feeling shared by Jody Ridpath.

“I became involved because I really think small things can make a big difference, and it is a big issue,” says Jody. “You just have to look to our oceans and some of the photos there that the little things can make a difference.”

Adds teen Brooke Elliott, “You have to start somewhere, and this is a good, small place to start.”

Straw Free Aurora found their own good, small place to start – at least publicly – by making a splash at June's Aurora Street Festival.

There, Brooke, her sister Keira, their friends, neighbours, and parents fanned out with those all-important clipboards to spread the word, and they had a very positive reception.

Since then, they have been to the Aurora Farmers' Market collecting signatures, and they continued their work at their neighbourhood's own street party.

“We had a petition at our community street party to sign, we have a social media presence where we're promoting articles and things of interest that we feel go to the community for education, awareness and action,” says Jill Donohue, noting their next step was to delegate to the August 7 General Committee meeting, a precursor to the August 14 Council meeting.

But, since this meeting was cancelled, they are hoping to find themselves on the agenda when Council resumes in September.

“We have three aims to present to Council: for businesses and organizations in Aurora to only give out a plastic drinking straw if a customer specifically asks for one,” says Ms. Dalie. “That is the number one priority. Our second priority is for every customer in Aurora to only ask for a drinking straw if they really need one. The third priority is for businesses in Aurora to consider using paper, biodegradable or reusable straws. Those are the three main focuses to raise awareness and, hopefully, with those three steps, we can have a plastic straw-free Aurora.”

They admit, however, this won't happen just with a Council vote and the Mayor's signature on a bylaw; there has to be community buy-in. That is where their education campaign comes in.

It is an education process and working with the environmental committee in Town, as well as local businesses, I think [we will show] this is a good idea and slowly grow the movement to gain acceptance, says Ms. Ridpath. There are some people and organizations that are hesitant to take this route on a total ban, and we understand that, like people with disabilities or hospitals who have a real need for plastic straws, but it is through education and understanding what alternatives there are.

Ms. Dalie adds they hope to be able to say that by raising awareness and education they can achieve their goal within two or three years.

For me, it is really important to hear from my children because my children are influencing me in making environmental choices, from eating less meat to not using as many straws, says Ms. Donohue. It is really important for me to acknowledge them and say, 'That's awesome,' and 'What can we do together?' I want to congratulate their children and encourage our children to follow and support them in their efforts because this is their world we need to protect.

You need to start somewhere. Straws may seem like such a little thing, but it is action and it makes people think about their plastic bags too. It's a trickle effect. That is what we're hoping to start: it starts with awareness and onto bigger things.