

Haunted Forest, Christmas Market among Top 100 Festivals in Ontario

Christmas came a little late ? or Halloween came in a little early ? for the Town of Aurora recently as its annual Haunted Forest and Christmas Market events placed among Festival & Events Ontario's Top 100.

Festival and Events Ontario's (FEO) Top 100 Awards recognizes the best festivals and events that take place each year Province-wide.

Each event was judged on innovation, uniqueness, economic impact, and community leadership.

?We are proud that two of our events have been named among FEO's Top 100 Festivals & Events for 2026,? said Mayor Tom Mrakas in a statement. ?This honour reflects the commitment, creativity, and hard work that our Town staff, community partners, and dedicated volunteers put into bringing these events to life. We are grateful to FEO for this recognition and to our community for its ongoing support.?

Organizers behind the events, also thanked community partners and dedicated volunteers, with Shelley Ware, Special Events Coordinator for the Town of Aurora, telling The Auroran having a ?supportive Mayor and Council? is also an essential ingredient in their success.

?We do produce 23 events a year, but we are working on 23 events a year all year-round for idea generation, innovation, networking with our colleagues, looking across the Province, and I even do a lot of webinars in other countries, and it's pulling all that together, keeping our synergies and energies high,? says Ware. ?We have such strong commitments from the volunteers, from such solid, solid community organizations ? Aurora is the perfect community with the right amount of heart, the right amount of support to be able to pull these experiences together, in addition to a very, very supportive Mayor and Town Council.

?The support we get enables us to really, really strive to do the best we can possibly do. We've got Council support, we've got volunteer support, community partner support, and it truly is a privilege.?

When asked what made the Haunted Forest, which marked its 20th anniversary in 2025, and the Christmas Market stand out from the crowd, Ware says it's the commitment to always have at least one new element in the program to keep residents engaged.

?I think it's the freshness,? she says. ?There's always a guarantee of a new element that things will change, and I also think whenever visitors come to Aurora they're getting a warm welcome, whether they're filling their car with gas, before they even get to the event, but once they get to the event, we strive for it to be an overall great experience.

?Both the Haunted Forest and the Christmas Market are extremely complex events and have many different layers. There are layers the community doesn't see, such as the intricacies of the emergency management plans that are in place, in addition to the complex marketing of the events, to the different types of programming that targets a variety of generations. In addition to that, we really focus hard on making events more accessible each go-round, so I think what makes them solid events is the community doesn't see that complexity. Hopefully they just see the smoothness.?

While this year's recognition from FEO is a testament to everyone involved in making them a success, Ware notes it's also a ?reflection of how unified our community is and how truly special it is.?

?I'm a firm believer that the events a municipality produces is creating the story of that community, so having our stories created in this way is really a huge bonus, and they can't happen if not for the community showing up time and time again, the endless volunteers always coming enthusiastic, and our community partners. They say it takes a village to raise a child, but I don't even know what the appropriate metaphor is for what pulls an event together, but we're truly privileged to be able to do this in Aurora.?

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