

Hillary House National Historic Site aims to welcome 1,400 visitors this year

From international visitors to movie shoots, 2025 was a banner year for the Aurora Historical Society and its Hillary House National Historic Site.

Now that the new year is under way, the Society is aiming to welcome more than 1,400 visitors to the site in 2026 to enjoy more than 25 programs, special events, and two exhibitions.

This was the vision outlined to Council this past fall by the Society as local lawmakers considered the 2026 Budget.

Looking back on 2025, the Society noted they completed the transfer of the Godfrey Collection, an expansive library of medical books, to the Archives of Ontario, a project supported by the Town, and increased their fundraising in a number of ways, including charitable gaming in Richmond Hill and in Newmarket.

"We have seen increased tour visitation this past summer, back up sometimes higher than pre-COVID numbers, so that is really exciting for us," said AHS curator and manager Kathleen Vahey. "We educated community members through outreach through nine programs - that's 662 people."

"Although we saw a decrease in the number of programs offered because of staff resources, we refocused our efforts on the most impactful events. The number of people we welcomed into Hillary House has actually increased when compared to last year. While the number of people reached via outreach has slightly decreased due to participating in fewer opportunities, we still believe that 600 people for a staff of one-and-a-half is still pretty good!"

A consistently positive trend, Vahey added, is in volunteerism with hundreds of hours of volunteer time given to the Society.

"As a small volunteer-led non-profit charitable organization with big aspirations, we continue to face ongoing challenges," Vahey continued. "This includes enhancing our fundraising revenue, increasing volunteer engagement, assessing the critical maintenance and needs of this 160-year-old Hillary House in a timely fashion and securing stable funding that will ensure we can tackle the more complicated and multi-phased restoration projects successfully."

Former Aurora mayor Geoffrey Dawe, who serves as Co-President of the Aurora Historical Society, noted that from a "straight dollars and cents" perspective, volunteers contributed the equivalent of "well over \$20,000 if you went just on the basic minimum wage."

"That's a monetary value, but the real value of volunteers is simply the fact we could not do what we do without our volunteers. We're extremely grateful for all the volunteers who come up and help us do all sorts of things, whether it is helping with teas or raking leaves," said Dawe.

"Our 2026 goals, we're looking at 25 programs and special events. We wish to present two exhibitions, we're shooting for over 2,000 hours in volunteer opportunities, we're looking at welcoming 1,400 visitors to Hillary House, and we hope to do Doors Open again [which was] a big bonus to us."

By Brock Weir
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