

Important issues facing residents are sometimes 'invisible'?



By Brock Weir

History is said to be written by the victors, but when it comes to pressing challenges facing communities like Aurora, awareness and the comfort level in discussing what can be tough subjects often depends on who is doing the talking.

That is something being grappled with by the United Way of York Region, as they look to engage the community and find a community's true strength within it as they tackle complex problems such as poverty, housing and employment. United Way held a roundtable discussion in Aurora last week, engaging residents and stakeholders alike, in a talk to look at some of these problems, symptoms and how to tackle them within Aurora.

'We know there is a sense of invisibility of issues in the Region,' says Jane Wedlock, Knowledge Mobilization Officer for the United Way. 'People who work in the field of social services or in schools or faith communities, they have a sense of it, but for other folks in the community who may not be connected, there is some degree of invisibility, but we feel there is a broader vulnerability.'

'The issue of affordable housing is something that always comes up as a major concern and there are common threads of how do we respond? Do we respond to the symptoms, or are we willing to go deeper to understand the real causes of some of these things? That is what we're trying to get a handle.'

But whether people are looking for a quick fix to the symptoms of the problem rather than digging deeper to cut it off at the root, is something that remains to be seen. When people get a sense that people in their community are hurting, they naturally want to help, and this is the collaborative response the United Way is looking to tap into, she added.

One problem in particular here in Town is the perennial sense that Aurora itself is an affluent community. While this might be so in many cases, it is not applicable across the board.

'It depends on who is telling the story,' she says. 'The stories of difficulty and exposure or vulnerability are sometimes difficult for people to hear and they might think of it as happening to somebody else, but it is actually happening closer to home. I wonder if people have some kind of reluctance to hear. It is hard if you can't see.'

That being said, there is evidence that the message is getting across in Aurora. Residents are hearing the message that poverty in town is an all too real issue and various faith groups are responding to the problems. Ms. Wedlock cites collaborative efforts made, for instance, by various Christian churches to provide a place to get a good meal and to combat as well the problems brought about by social isolation through programs such as Welcoming Arms, Welcoming Table, and Rise and Shine breakfasts.

“People are trying to respond and our interest is in how it is happening,” she says. “I never want to second guess what a community is doing and it is sometimes a challenge, but also a great surprise sometimes, to just to learn about all the cool things communities are doing and I always look forward to these conversations.

One predominant issue tackled by the group, who assembled for the roundtable at Aurora Public Library on Thursday evening was the issue of growth and how it affects the issues of poverty, housing and other challenges within a community.

“I think people are really having mixed feelings about growth and change because on the one hand growth is really driving housing prices up and people can't necessarily afford to live in Aurora anymore, but it is also making a commute more and more difficult because as growth comes, so do the stoplights, so the commute which was once three minutes is now almost an hour,” said Carol Lever of Aurora United Church.

“But at the same time, there is also excitement. Like a lot of faith communities, there was a dip in congregational attendance and growth, but now we're starting to see a bit of an upswing that as our community grows, people do want to feel connected and they will find their own way to feel connected.”

While Ms. Lever said there is both excitement and growth on this front, Mayor Geoffrey Dawe agreed that some people are “energised” by the growth.

“There has been a substantial increase in the diversity that we're experiencing,” he said. “That is, in my opinion, bringing some very positive changes to Town. There are a lot of new experiences.”

She agreed, noting that she and her family were first hesitant to move to Aurora because it was very “WASPy” and they had concerns about raising their children in a community lacking diversity. Now that the demographics have changed, her children have grown because of it.