

Lots to do during National Volunteer Week



By Brock Weir

There is no shortage of things to do during National Volunteer Week this month. Unfortunately, that means the same can't be said for volunteers.

Canada's National Volunteer Week, which kicked off Sunday, April 21 aims to "recognize and celebrate" the work that volunteers do across the county. Neighbourhood Network, the division of Magna for the Community, which seeks to connect volunteers with like-minded groups and volunteer opportunities, will cap the week with their annual tree planting day, bringing together hundreds of volunteers across Aurora, Newmarket, and East Gwillimbury to plant saplings in five different locations. Since its inception five years ago this event has grown from the neighbourhood of 900 trees planted in the early days to an annual average of 2,500, according to Tom Taylor, former mayor of Newmarket, and an ambassador for the community group.

"Imagine Canada, an organization run out of Ottawa right across Canada, provides a formula for calculating the dollar value for volunteering in a community," he said. "Using Aurora's population of those over 15 years of age and taking 48 per cent of the population at \$19.50 per hour for 149 hours per year per person - these are the averages which are being experienced in this part of Canada and Ontario - it works out to \$67.6 million in Aurora alone.

"Looking at it another way, it means if our taxes had to pay for all of these volunteer services, if they all stopped volunteering and we had to pay for those services, the municipal portion of your tax bill triples. Fortunately for us, the thousands and thousands of people who volunteer here in Aurora don't look at it that way. They all just want to help."

Volunteer opportunities available during the length of National Volunteer Week showcase a wide breadth of groups and events across the Region that are in need of assistance.

Large scale events alone include A Taste for Life, held by the AIDS Committee of York Region, bringing together area restaurants (in Aurora's case, Chinook and Bonsai Hill Tea House) where 25 per cent of bills will be donated to the AIDS Committee. Held this Wednesday, April 24, Bonsai Hill will offer two seatings of high tea with reservations at 1.30 p.m. and 3.30 p.m. Chinook is also taking reservations for a set dinner menu at \$45 per person. For more information, visit www.atasteforlife.org/york-region.html.

Volunteers are also needed for blood drives for the Canadian Blood Services at a number of events in Aurora. The first is on Thursday, April 25 at the Aurora branch of the Royal Canadian Legion (105 Industrial Parkway) from 2 p.m. - 8 p.m., on the Friday at Town Hall from 11.30 a.m. - 2.30 p.m., and up in Newmarket at the York Region Headquarters on Yonge Street from 9 a.m. - 12 noon.

Beyond Volunteer Week, Neighbourhood Network's website, www.neighbourhoodnetwork.org, showcases an ever-growing list of volunteer opportunities throughout the Region. Upcoming chances include placements for pantry help at the Aurora Food Pantry, gala volunteers for the Alzheimer's Society of York Region, tree planters with the Aurora Community Arboretum, daffodil sales for the Canadian Cancer Society, and drivers for CHATS ? Community and Home Assistance to Seniors.

Beyond these often seasonal placements, seasons also bring a change in what volunteers are needed to do. With winter not yet a memory, the need for people shovelling snow for those who are otherwise unable to do so themselves has also been a growing mandate for the group.

When Mr. Taylor appeared before Council this month, this was underscored by Councillor Wendy Gaertner who said with the ageing population, ensuring seniors have shovelled driveways is becoming a serious problem.

?Clearing sidewalks is what we try to do,? said Mr. Taylor. ?We try to find someone in their community area and pair a youth with a senior to come and do their walks. We currently have about 55 different seniors who are using that facility each year. It is very important and we would like to increase that, but it also takes a volunteer who makes it a priority through the night to be there in the morning.?