

Youth Volunteer Fair is part of wider vision for Aurora

By Brock Weir

School is back in session, and with the start of the year, comes the rush of local students looking to fulfil their need for community volunteer hours.

If you're one of these teens struggling to find a good fit, you might be in luck next Thursday as the Town of Aurora, in conjunction with up to 20 community groups, hosts a Youth Volunteer Fair.

The Youth Volunteer Fair gets underway September 24 from 4 ? 7 p.m. at the Aurora Family Leisure Complex.

?I really want events that are delivered from the Town of Aurora to have that cache of youth knowing that if they come to a Town of Aurora event, it is going to be meaningful,? says Dan Ridsdale, Youth Programmer for the Town of Aurora. ?If we're going to host an event that allows youth to find volunteer opportunities, it is a meaningful one and they know they can walk away knowing there is a lot of stuff they can take away from it.?

The Youth Volunteer Fair was an idea born out of suggestions taken in by the Town through teens serving on the Town's Youth Engagement Committee as well as suggestions received in The Loft, the youth drop-in space at the Aurora Family Leisure Complex.

?Moving forward, everything we're doing is coming from the request, or the idea, of a youth,? says Mr. Ridsdale.

But, this is also part of a wider goal set by the Town. Aurora is currently in the process of receiving designation from Play Works Partnership (The Ontario Partnership for Active and Engaged Youth) to be a ?Youth Friendly Community.?

Focused on the ?power of play?, this designation signifies communities like Aurora are making a true investment in youth play, whether it is through civic engagement, sport, cultural activities, or any combination thereof.

?Come January 2016, we are going to be submitting our application to become a Youth Friendly Community,? says Mr. Ridsdale. ?There are 16 criteria, and a lot of it is determining the variety of youth services and access youth have to those services. This Youth Friendly Community Designation is largely a test on whether or not youth have a voice and whether or not there is engagement happening.

?For youth to have a voice, we have to show we're giving them the various platforms for them to speak their voice. They want to see there is alternative transportation being offered and they want to see us using more modern ways of communicating with our youth and connecting them with community services.?

Another focus, he says, is ?wraparound support? for youth-related services, rather than individual groups going it alone without a partnership. Through The Loft, Mr. Ridsdale says he invited community groups to participate and be there to share their services with young people using the space, including 360 Kids, which tackles the issue of youth homelessness.

?Rather than just having [these groups] just fend for themselves, we're going to have them come to some of our youth events and we'll work in partnership with them,? he says. ?The Youth Friendly Designation is about making sure everyone who is working together has the best interests of the youth [at heart]. It is a needs analysis for us to unpack various services and make sure we're all doing it in a streamlined, uniform fashion.?