

Neighbourhood Network eyes expansion on seventh anniversary



By Brock Weir

A seven year anniversary is not a particularly important milestone for most organizations, but most organizations aren't Neighbourhood Network.

The Aurora-based volunteer organization celebrated their anniversary before a packed house of volunteers, community partners, and dignitaries in Newmarket, that not only highlighted their achievements to date, but also where they plan to go from here.

Neighbourhood Network, an arm of Magna for the Community, which was founded by Belinda Stronach during her time as Member of Parliament was originally envisioned as a way to connect community groups with volunteers within the community that share common interests. It was an immediate success and has since expanded to East Gwillimbury, and Georgina.

This year, however, their eyes are trained west with an expansion into King Township, which is expected as early as this spring.

"King Township has always been on the radar for us," said Steve Hinder of Neighbourhood Network. "It has just been a matter of us making sure we have our resources and our administration and we're able and ready to expand. When we come into a municipality looking to expand, we invite them on board as full-fledged partners with us and we hit the ground running."

The group met with King Mayor Steve Pellegrini earlier this month, along with members of the King Chamber of Commerce and the Arts Council of King. They plan to tentatively roll out plans during an upcoming meeting of King-based community groups before a formal presentation seeking a partnership with Council.

Since Neighbourhood Network was established in 2008, it has grown to encompass nearly 250 registered community partners, from the ABLE Network to the York Region Food Network, connecting these groups with close to 7,000 registered volunteers.

"The services that our partners provide in the community range from healthcare to peer mentorship, to sports, to music and, frankly, all parts in between," said Mr. Hinder. "They help make up the vibrant community in which we all live. We are very fortunate in that our community leaders recognize the importance of partnerships and volunteerism."

Getting in on Neighbourhood Network on the ground floor were former Aurora mayor Tim Jones and former Newmarket mayor Tom Taylor, who continue serving as the Network's community ambassadors to this day. Both men were on hand last week to share their experiences, as well as the unique contributions the Network has made to the community, which they can see from their own unique vantage points.

"My prior political background has made me focus on social services and social needs," said Mr. Taylor. "Neighbourhood Network was to be a way to address those needs in a very practical manner by acting as a conduit between the volunteers and charities."

Added Mr. Jones: "When you have been in politics for a considerable amount of time, you get to know your community, you get to know the people, the groups, the individuals and your network is such that it makes you a person that can get out, see people, talk to people, and spread the good news. In our case, the good news was Neighbourhood Network."

Out in the community, Mr. Taylor says he takes particular pride in being involved in their local tree planting programs, while Mr. Jones is invariably on hand to participate in local food drives, particularly as the holiday season approaches.

Crunching the numbers, Neighbourhood Networks Erin Cerenzia said since the inception, Neighbourhood Network has collected over \$23,000 and thousands of pounds of food for local food pantries - including 1,000 pounds this year alone. 2014 saw them collect over \$12,000 worth of gifts, clothing and gift cards for local charities while, to date, volunteer planting days have resulted in 11,000 plantings of trees, shrubs and bushes spread out across the four participating municipalities.

"I think it is safe to say these programs have had a tremendous impact on our partner municipalities and we're excited to continue to grow and accept the challenge of meeting community needs in the future," she said.

Sharing that sentiment was Daniele Zanotti, CEO of the United Way of York Region.

"Seven years ago when I went to Magna when you launched Neighbourhood Network, I left the room thinking, "Hmm?" he said. "We at the United Way then went out and did meeting houses across the Region talking to residents about the issues [surrounding] poverty, affordable housing, seniors, but residents said this the most: we love our neighbourhood, we don't feel connected, we want to get involved. Those three things emerged."

To that end, the United Way began giving out seed money through their Strength Investment programs, benefitting local groups and individuals who came up with local solutions, whether businesses, residents, faith groups, or community agencies.

"Of the \$300,000 we gave out, these little groups leveraged \$3 million," he said. "Nobody does community like Neighbourhood Network. This is a celebration of a community coming together and finding its own solutions and answers."