

Bad night's sleep raises awareness of homelessness

By Bill Rea

It was a lousy night's sleep Friday for Mayor Allan Thompson and Councillor Johanna Downey.

They slept in their vehicles in a parking lot as part of the United Way of Peel Region's fight against homelessness. The event was the third annual Longest Night.

Downey was joined by friend Betsy Wilson in her vehicle.

The temperature was about 4 C when they woke up at about 6 a.m Saturday.

"It was cold," Thompson commented. "Could have been a lot colder."

"I couldn't be productive sleeping like this," he added.

The trio had an advantage that most people forced to sleep in their cars might not have. There were washroom facilities nearby that they had access to.

Thompson said he started in the back seat, but eventually moved up front to try and sleep.

Downey said she found the night no more restful.

"I didn't really sleep at all," she said. "It's very difficult to sleep when it's freezing out, and it really wasn't that super cold a night."

"It's a relief now that we can go home to our beds," she added. "I'm going home and go to bed, a warm bed."

Downey and Thompson were also taking part in the effort as part of a fundraiser for the United Way. Their target was \$5,000, and they had been pledged \$3,750 by the time they woke up.

United Way reported more than \$100,000 was raised region-wide.

Thompson observed there are people sleeping in the streets in Toronto, but pointed out it's more common to see people in vehicles in Peel. He added United Way has said there's about 20,000 people in Peel in that situation.

United Way reports this effort in Caledon was not the only one.

There were several business people taking part in similar activities around the region, including public officials like Peel Regional Police Chief Jennifer Evans, Brampton Mayor Linda Jeffrey, Brampton Councillor Martin Mederios and Anita Stellinga, interim president and CEO of the United Way of Peel Region.

In all, more than 140 people slept in the vehicles throughout Peel.

"This is my third time participating in this event and I can tell you it doesn't get easier," Stellinga said. "The isolation, the fear, the cold it all adds up and truly makes it feel like the longest night in my life. To think we have people in our communities who experience this every day motivates me to continue working with our partners like the Region of Peel to address this issue."

"Spending a night in your car is difficult and cold, but it's a reality for many in our community," Jeffrey said. "By taking part in United Way's Longest Night challenge, I want to highlight this issue and help raise funds for those who have to choose between food and shelter."

United Way reported social media was filled with stories of isolation, fear, disbelief and personal reflection as participants shared their experiences using #LongestNightPeel. The conversation carried many themes, including the recognition that participants had an option at any moment to go inside their homes.



Area resident Betsy Wilson, Councillor Johanna Downey and Mayor Allan Thompson were standing by their respective sleeping accommodations at about 11 p.m. Friday before retiring for the night. Photo by Bill Rea