

CCS?and Exchange setting inclusion as a main long-term goal

By Bill Rea

There is a need for social change in Caledon, and Caledon Community Services (CCS) considers itself well placed to help coordinate it.

Caledon Council recently heard a presentation on a collaborative data project, which was commissioned by the Exchange and funded by Peel Region.

Some of the results presented indicated that Caledon is not as affluent as its reputation might prompt some to believe. Michelle Veinot, director of community services at CCS, said statistics from the project showed that during the past year, 44 per cent had been unable to afford things they needed (32 per cent had not been able to pay their bills on time). As well, 55 per cent said the cost of living in Caledon is unreasonable.

Veinot said the project involved the collaborative efforts of 18 service agencies throughout the community.

She told Council the report provides data on pressing social issues in town. There were hundreds of residents who offered their opinions on the most challenging social concerns, as well as their visions on the directions Caledon should take.

Veinot added the results supported the Exchange's focus on issues that matter most to residents, and helps the partners make a coordinated approach to addressing them.

Demographics in Caledon tell part of the story on how the community is changing, Veinot observed, but she added they don't address how people feel about their community, or how they can believe it can become a more welcoming and inclusive place. As the report drew input from residents, she said it describes a community that Caledon aspires to be, namely connected, accepting and engaged.

There are a number of items that people value about life and lifestyle in Caledon, including sense of safety, small-town feeling, outdoor activities, the people, proximity to Toronto, sense of community, events and programing, peace and quite, and the urban-rural mix.

?No surprises here,? Veinot observed.

She also provided some statistics that pointed to certain issues, such as isolation. One in five people felt isolated from others in town.

?That's not surprising, because of the geographical area of Caledon,? Veinot remarked.

Other numbers she presented indicated that 48 per cent of people offering input believe most people care about issues in Caledon, 63 per cent thought there were opportunities to get involved, but many people are not using them to address community challenges.

And about 40 per cent reported to needing help, but not knowing where to look.

As well, there were 70 per cent who said they had to leave Caledon at some point over the past year to get help they needed, and 54 per cent said there were not enough employment opportunities in Caledon.

Other issues that were cited were a lack of supports and activities for children, teens, young adults, people with disabilities, seniors and newcomers, insufficient mental health and addiction services, lack of affordable housing, growth and development in town that is not balanced or strategic, the gap between rich and poor and the lack of affordable and nutritious food.

?That's a big group of people living in Caledon,? Veinot observed, adding there are many who feel isolated, despite a strong sense of community.

She also pointed out that there is a lot of growth and change coming to Caledon, and that process is making many people feel left out, with the community failing to provide supports they need to be healthy. She added there are many who would want to get involved in the community, but can't find the opportunities they are looking for.

Veinot also said the report identified four priority actions that people believed would be key to reaching aspirational goals; having people positively interact with each other, supporting one another, understanding and caring about the challenges facing others and being aware of services and activities in the community.

Veinot stated the report's findings carry important implications, which underscore the need for a ?hub,? like the Exchange, which is designed to reinforce Caledon's social fabric. The report indicated that the Exchange must find ways to overcome obstacles inhibiting Caledon's ability to be connected, accepting and engaging.

She said there is need for space, like at the Exchange, to let people give back to the community, but a lot of people who work will feel isolated and disconnected.

Veinot told Council the next 13 years, there will be a clear path followed that will focus on such things as isolation, mental health and system transformation, specifically targeting youth between 12 an 18. She said the movement is coming in areas where it has not been seen before.

She added most of the agencies collaborating on this are involved with social services, but there are others, including the Peel District School Board, Caledon OPP and Toronto and Region Conservation Authority.

Councillor Annette Groves praised Veinot for her presentation, commenting it brought to light some important matters, including some that people might not want to hear of.

Groves pointed out there are a number of working poor in the community.

"I have a lot of my residents who are struggling," she remarked. "I think it's a serious problem."

She added the challenges will keep growing as long as the community continues to grow.

Groves also observed people feel isolated and not welcome. She said she had been talking to a resident who spoke of Welcome Wagon, pointing out there used to be a chapter here.

"We don't have that any more," she remarked, adding a lot of residents don't know what services are being offered.

She also said the challenges of youth and mental health are talked about a lot. She wondered about the young people in Grade 7, and how things will be for them as they grow older.

Such issues are being considered by the collaborators, Veinot told her.

She added funding is always an issue, pointing out it takes time to make changes in a community, and it's sometimes hard to finance it.

Councillor Nick deBoer observed that one gets a feel for what's going on in Caledon by sitting around the council table.

"We do have the same issues as any other community," he remarked, suggesting the matter be referred to Strategic Initiatives for more discussion.

Councillor Rob Mezzapelli observed the general goal of the project is not to maintain the status quo. He added it has identified gaps, and he thanked CCS for doing it.

Mezzapelli also said the Town offers programs to assist new residents, adding staff is trying to hard to fill gaps.

He was curious about the causes of isolation.

Veinot said that came up in all discussions, adding there are a number of contributing factors, including geography, availability of transportation, lack of supports from family and friends, etc., and "all of the above."

She added there were signs of isolation in just about every community.

"Get out and know your neighbour," Mayor Allan Thompson suggested.