

Mayor and councillors take part in Longest Night

By Bill Rea

Some people might sleep in their cars on a lark.

Or maybe they've had too much to drink and decide they're not in a fit state to drive. Or maybe they've had a tiff with their spouse and have been locked out of the house.

Or maybe they have no house and the car is the only place they have to sleep.

That is reality for a lot of people, and it's a reality that many might have trouble understanding.

Mayor Allan Thompson, along with Councillors Jennifer Innis and Annette Groves, were joined by Anita Stellinga, vice-president of community investment for United Way of Peel Region, spending a night getting a feel for just that. They were taking part in the second annual Longest Night event, aimed at raising awareness of the homelessness issue in the community.

'I think this is the first time I've ever slept in a parked car overnight,' Innis remarked the next morning.

The four of them gathered in the parking lot of Town Hall in Caledon East at 11 p.m. Friday night, and spent the night sleeping in their respective vehicles.

They got a lousy night's sleep.

'Sleeping in the car sucks,' Thompson declared shortly after 6 a.m. Saturday.

They also were in agreement that they picked up a certain appreciation of what homeless people have to deal with.

Thompson observed there are more than 220,000 people in Peel who are deemed to be homeless. 'There's four times as many people sleeping in cars than sleeping in shelters,' he remarked.

The four got through the experience only a little the worse for wear, but they were also aware that they only got a taste of what it's like to be forced to spend the night in a car. For one thing, Thompson and the two councillors had keys to get into Town Hall, meaning they had easy access to washrooms.

And Innis wondered about how homeless people with children would handle things. 'How do we do that with little kids?' she wondered.

The night was windy, and Innis and Stellinga felt their cars rocking as a result. And Groves said she woke up in the middle of the night, feeling the cold.

'You do sleep because you're exhausted,' Thompson observed, although he said it wasn't very restful, and he wondered how people are supposed to be productive after such a night, especially if that's part of their regular routine. 'Where do you go when you need to wash up?'

Groves agreed that it would be hard on people who had to do it all the time.

'You can't get a good rest, and you can't function properly,' she said.

Thompson said he started the night sitting in the driver's seat, but moved into the back seat at about 1 a.m., after his lower back started hurting. At five feet, 11 inches, he found he had to scrunch.

There are also safety concerns. All four vehicles were parked behind Town Hall, which was deemed safe.

'I felt safe because we were all together,' Groves said.

But Stellinga wondered about people who have to park in places that might not be as safe.

She also pointed the four of them were able to go home at the end.

'Where do they go?' Groves wondered.



Mayor Allan Thompson, Councillor Jennifer Innis, Anita Stellinga, vice-president of community investment for United Way of Peel Region, and Councillor Annette Groves spent Friday night sleeping in their cars at Town Hall as part of the Longest Night. Photo by Bill Rea