

Thanks ? a million

By Tony Pearson

I've been running around town a lot in the last week or so. The reason is that there's been a lot of activity among town groups and agencies. Last Friday, the Community Integration Association threw a barbecue at their Alice Street HQ. Just a parking lot away, North Hastings was running their jail ?n' bail fun-and-fundraiser. This week, another two events raised a lot of money for local groups: the Switchyard held a jam-packed barbecue to support its youth programs, and Home Again filled the Curling Club to aid its dog and cat rescue operations.

Schools were active too. At North Hastings High School, the new student leaders started planning for next year. And the school's athletes were honoured at a special awards assembly, as were their volunteer coaches.

Of course, you can't mention the high school without noting how busy the Northern Environmental Research students were ? as usual. The NERDS were strengthening their program through their annual fundraising golf tournament. Then a number of them helped install vegetable gardens at Riverstone Seniors home. In that, they were joined by York River Grade 5s. The effort was coordinated by Harvest the North, a group dedicated to making Bancroft more self-sufficient in local produce.

The list of last week's activities goes on. The Manor's new sound system, contributed through sponsorships, was inaugurated by a volunteer band. The curling club is starting a new activity for seniors ? ?pickleball? ? and drew a healthy (in both senses) crowd to its orientation meeting. The amateur Theatre Guild announced plans for community theatre without using the Playhouse. The Farmers market launched its second season with lots of vendors. The Art Gallery opened a new show with a local artist.

Yet more from the last week or so: the Bancroft refugee sponsorship committee announced initial fundraising plans to get its Syrian family to Canada, and to provide more support for local needy families. Local businesses were honoured for their fundraising efforts on behalf of Highland Shores Children's Aid. The Lions ran a dog walk to raise money for Guide Dogs. Local forest industry companies sponsored a day of learning for elementary students through Forestry Day.

This coming weekend sees the efforts of the Relay for Life volunteers come to fruition, as money is raised for cancer research, prevention, and victim support. The amount contributed by a community as small as Bancroft is nothing short of amazing.

So the town is humming (did I forget to mention the recent North Hastings music festival?) Novel ways are used to combine fundraising with fun. The firefighters hold a ?mud-run.? Home Again holds a fashion show. Barbecues are fired up on behalf of the developmentally challenged, youth at risk, and child development.

It's been said many times before that much of the social ?drive? in Bancroft is supplied by volunteers ? as is the case in most small towns. In addition, town businesses support many worthy causes. And major economic benefits flow from volunteer efforts ? such as the Business Improvement Association's organization of the Wheels/Water/Wings festival, or the Chamber of Commerce's organization of Gemboree, or BAFIA's work on Saw-Tech. Even where there are town contributions, they pale beside the value of the time and labour and often cash contributed by volunteers and supporters. When you add up the contributions of volunteers ? the time and effort they give ? and the donations made to local causes, you're well over a million.

Often, volunteer efforts directly save municipal finances ? for example, when fire departments raise money to buy their equipment, instead of sending the bill to the town. Consider how volunteer activities relieve the municipality of the need to have an organized recreation program for children and youth. The Town of Bancroft used to put on children's summer camp; now it's done by North Hastings Children's Services (let's forget for a moment that some town councillors wanted to charge NHCS for any non-Bancroft kids who may use their park)

From time to time, town councils pass resolutions of thanks to their volunteers. But considering how vital volunteer work is to small towns, maybe town councils should think about a few gestures, rather than just words. I know of towns that have receptions to honour their volunteers, with food and even tokens of appreciation (e.g. photos of town scenes with words of thanks. I know of one town in Renfrew County, smaller than Bancroft, which throws an annual formal dinner for those who donate their time.

Granted, volunteers aren't in it for awards. But that doesn't mean they shouldn't get some recognition beyond a council resolution. Maybe it's even worth a committee of council and volunteers discussing a couple of options.

Volunteers, after all, frequently burn out. Sometimes, when events don't come off as planned, they can get discouraged.

Perhaps the occasional personal touch, and tangible form of recognition, from the towns they are striving to improve, might be in order. After all, it's said that when people feel their volunteer efforts are expected rather than appreciated, they stop.