

Dufferin holds forum seeking transportation solutions

“We cannot solve our problems with the same thinking we used when we created them.” Einstein

Einstein's quote symbolizes the spirit in which Headwaters Communities in Action (HCIA) approaches solutions to local issues facing the community. “Doing things as we have always done them will not enable us to innovate and find new solutions to long-standing issues,” says the group. With this in mind, the HCIA partnered with the Rural Ontario Institute (ROI) to host a forum on rural transportation concerns June 20th at the Best Western in Orangeville. Opening remarks were given by Shelburne Mayor Ed Crewson. The forum is one of three being offered across Ontario this month as part of the Accelerating Rural Transportation Solutions Initiative.

Norm Ragetlie from the Rural Ontario Institute was the emcee for the event. He and Shirley Boxem, project lead for HCIA, welcomed more than sixty attendees from Dufferin and surrounding regions, indicating rural transportation is a challenge across the province and demonstrating the priority placed on healthy communities as accessible communities.

Since its inception in 2004, HCIA has facilitated community conversations on rising issues and supported projects that enhance life in the Headwaters area in order to co-ordinate an effective response. HCIA says, “Inadequate transportation options are a reality for Dufferin County residents and the need to enhance available options has been identified as a community priority by many different organizations.” Headwaters Communities in Action has partnered with the County of Dufferin to convene a small group of community leaders from various sectors to form The Dufferin Rural Transportation Learning Group to explore possible solutions. The group has been information sharing with the Rural Ontario Institute and the Ontario Health Communities Coalition, collaborating to enhance and strengthen the knowledge of effective models and emerging innovation in rural transportation through studies. There are three main elements of the project:

• Identifying and documenting case studies of effective rural regional transportation approaches in Ontario.

• A study of the current and potential business models and financing sources for cost-shared rural transportation systems.

• Communication and dialogue to share the above resources at events and through learning channels such as webinars and forums being organized by partners.

Shirley Boxem, HCIA project lead says, The Rural Ontario Institute obtained a Trillium grant to study three regions in Ontario, one of them Dufferin, to provide recommendations for moving forward. The purpose of the full day forum on June 20th was to “share knowledge of effective models and emerging innovation in rural Ontario.” Municipal staff, rural planners, social service agencies, community-based organizations, and all those interested were given the opportunity to hear new ideas, share their knowledge and discuss priorities building on HCIA's approach of emphasizing “collaboration across sectors and political boundaries and promoting community-based solutions to address complex issues.” Project lead for HCIA, Shirley Boxem, said, “This forum was the latest step in a long process of seeking transportation solutions in Dufferin County. We started a roadmap to move forward with the resources we have and understand where opportunities lie.”

According to the Rural Ontario Institute, one of the biggest transportation challenges facing rural Ontario is the financial sustainability of improving services. The shortcomings are at the core of broader issues such as economic development and access to health care. “Our county is resource stretched,” said Boxem, “the HCIA Transportation working group will assess the conclusions from the forum and determine next steps if viable.” Forum participants heard presentations, including 10 recent case studies of effective rural transportation approaches in the province and an analysis of cost-shared rural transportation systems. “A healthy community means citizens are sufficiently mobile and necessary services are accessible,” said Ms. Boxem.

Those who attended the show shared observations and discussed issues, problem solving suggestions in small groups. Boxem explains that the information collected from this forum, and others will be shared with the public and prepared into a report for municipal, provincial and federal policy makers.

By Marni Walsh