This page was exported from - Shelburne Free Press
Export date: Fri Oct 30 5:08:19 2026 / +0000 GMT

Headwaters Rising: Listening to what rises to the surface and answering the call

Measuring the well-being of a community is much like measuring the depth of a river with a stick ? you can get an idea of a particular spot at a particular moment, but it does not capture the complexity of the river as a whole.

The river will change over time and through space. Before we step in, it is important to check the depth, temperature, and current of the river, to check upstream sources and downstream hazards, and to best prepare for what we might encounter.

What it means to be well in our community is a rich and complex picture that cannot be captured in a few data points. Before we jump into complex community issues, or guide a growing community into a thriving future, it is important to check the temperature, test the currents and deeply listen to what is rising to the surface for residents.

At Headwaters Communities In Action (HCIA), we believe that the best way to understand and ensure the safety and well-being of our community is to keep listening and foster action on what we hear. As part of the work we do with dozens of community partners, we hold up a mirror to Dufferin County by inviting residents to share their honest experiences, perceptions and opinions through the Community Safety and Well-Being (CSWB) survey.

More than data collection, it is an invitation for our community to look at itself, map our shared strengths and reveal the areas where our collective current poses risks to those who struggle to keep their heads above water.

The responses we receive paint a complex and personal picture of life in our region. While many residents deeply value our stunning natural environment and the neighbourliness of the rural-urban lifestyle, others shared stories of profound isolation. We heard from an older lesbian who expressed feeling completely invisible, and a single mother who felt looked down upon in a neighbourhood dominated by older, married couples.

Our neighbours shared experiences of severe social anxiety and PTSD, revealing that a simple trip to the grocery store can feel insurmountable, and the subtle, heavy weight of feeling out of place due to shifting demographics, visible disabilities, or economic hardship.

The survey reveals a community that is aware of its challenges and where priority action should be taken. Despite a misperception about crime trends, residents were generally well attuned to pressing needs.

Out of 607 respondents, an overwhelming 71.1 per cent stated they do not believe everyone in Dufferin County has housing appropriate to their needs. Strikingly, 26.3 per cent of respondents noted they only ?sometimes? had enough healthy, safe, and culturally relevant food, pointing to a known and worsening issue of food insecurity across the region.

Community safety, housing, mental health, family support and food insecurity emerged as top priorities for the 2025-2028 CSWB Plan.

Recognizing the challenges our communities face, and having some power to act on them, partners at the Dufferin County CSWB Integration Table, co-chaired by HCIA, have been helping realize a vision of community care that centres the community voice, embodies true service integration and focuses on upstream prevention. Significant progress was made last year in key areas:

? Housing and Mental Health: The Homelessness and Addiction Recovery Treatment (HART) Hub began offering integrated supports for individuals facing housing and substance use challenges. 27 new permanent supportive housing units opened on First Street in Orangeville.

? Family Support: The Youth Wellness Hub will be using community spaces to reduce travel and stigma barriers for people aged 12 to 25.

? Food Insecurity: New local public health research is identifying priority actions. Initiatives like the Giving Spoon and Food for You are providing ready-to-eat meals and combating social isolation. Infrastructure projects like the Commissary Kitchen in Shelburne will expand the capacity of local food entrepreneurs.

? Community Care: In 2025, 15 Care Days held across Dufferin and Caledon served 241 individuals, providing immediate, low-barrier access to health, nutrition, and housing supports in safe environments.

CSWB priorities are strongly tied to local municipal responsibilities.

For instance, addressing road safety, crime and intimate partner violence connects to the municipal OPP Detachment Boards, which help govern local policing priorities.

Housing affordability and supply are driven by municipal zoning bylaws and county-level housing and land use plans.

Food insecurity and family supports are directly impacted by local economic development efforts and the ease of accessing appropriate services.

The CSWB process provides important insights to help us identify and navigate the rapids of change, together. Our local democratic systems hold many tools to support upstream solutions, clear obstacles, and put wind in the sails of progress. Who we elect to wield those tools matters.

On Oct. 26, residents will head to the polls for the municipal election. If we want to elect decision-makers who reflect the urgency and direction demanded by our community, we need many responsible, informed and community-minded residents to run for office.

The last several election cycles saw a concerning number of acclaimed council seats, particularly in smaller towns and townships, simply because no one else put their name on the ballot. When seats are acclaimed, voters don't have a choice in who represents them.

Nomination Day is Aug. 21, 2026.

If you look at the mirror our community held up, do you see yourself in its priorities? If you feel a pull to put your oar in the water, or take the helm of local government, consider running for council. If not you, encourage someone who you think would be great. Your neighbours deserve choice.

It's not as daunting as you might think.

Come talk to people who've been through it at two Counsel on Council Mixer events being hosted on July 22, from 5 to 7 p.m. at Mono Centre Brewing Co. in Mono and July 26, from 4 to 6 p.m. at Grand River Chop House in Grand Valley.

We have traced the stream of information to reach the source of what matters to our community. Now it's your turn: enlist candidates who will help create the community you and your neighbours want, candidates who will listen and go with the flow of what our community has told us.

Sit with this question this month: ?What would you do about these priorities if you were on council??

Headwaters Rising is a monthly column from Headwaters Communities In Action. This month's column was contributed (with help) by Jennifer Payne, executive director of HCIA. Learn more about our organization at hcia.ca. To read the Dufferin County Community Safety & Well-Being Plan and annual updates, visit: dufferincounty.ca/plans-policies/community-safety-well-being-plan/