

Manitoulin Island charities and service clubs struggle with donation challenges

By **Michael Erskine** - May 27, 2020



Pallets of prepackaged groceries arrive at Manitoulin Family Resources repurposed help centre, ready to be distributed across Manitoulin Island.

MANITOULIN – The cancellation of nearly all the mass attendance summer events have left several Island service clubs reeling as they have witnessed their major fundraising opportunities go down in a blaze of COVID-19 restrictions. Other Island charities, however, have dodged the bullet thanks to strong long-term foundations and, in some cases, just the luck of the draw and timing of the pandemic.

For the Little Current Lions Club the loss of Haweater Weekend is a heavy blow, according to Lions Club president Bruce Burnett, but the heavier hit has probably come from the impact of the pandemic restrictions on the club's popular Catch the Ace draw. "March 16 was our last draw," he said. "Normally we would be up in the thousands of dollars by now. It's having a real impact on that."

The draw has been a steady font from which to draw for charitable donations the Little Current Lions Club contributes to the community over the past three-and-a-half years. Without that flow the frequency and amounts available to the club have plummeted.

"We would be giving out \$600 to \$700 every week when we first started," said Lion Bruce of the prize pool. An equal amount would be going into the donation kitty. "It just got bigger and bigger," he said. "That allowed us to give that money out to needs in the community."



As for the cancellation of the immensely popular Haweater Weekend, the Lions Club president said that it was a “difficult decision, but the right one.”

“It wasn’t how we expected to celebrate the 53rd Haweater Weekend,” said Lion Bruce. “This is the very first time it has been cancelled. Thankfully, it was in time to let our vendors and entertainers know, although I think most of them had a fairly good idea this would happen anyway. Besides, I don’t think we want to be bringing thousands of people to the Island right now anyway.”

Other suppliers, such as the company that supplies the fireworks that typically draw thousands of viewers to the Little Current waterfront at the culmination of the August long weekend celebration have been understanding and supportive, he said. “We put down a deposit in the fall each year to help them get things ready for the next season. They have agreed to just move it forward to apply to next year.”

The cancellation of the annual Southeast Manitoulin Lions Club Summerfest has hit that organization particularly hard, noted club president Lisa Hallaert. “Oh, my goodness yes, the pandemic has had a lot of impact,” she said. “Summerfest had to be cancelled and it has hit our Nevada ticket sales really hard as well because, well, there is nowhere for people to buy them with all the closures.”

“The really unfortunate thing is that without that money coming in, we don’t have the money to give out,” said Lion Lisa. “This at a time when the need is really going up. A lot of people can’t really afford to spend money with their income interrupted. They just don’t have the disposable income.”

Manitoulin Special Olympics community co-ordinator and coach Janet Anning said that while the cancellation of the annual Bluegrass in the Park fundraiser is a definite loss on many levels for her athletes and the residents of Manitoulin Community Living who enjoy attending and square dancing at the event, the organization is on solid ground. “We can afford to sit out a year without it impacting us too hard thanks to the strong community support we receive and our incredible sponsors,” she said. “On the flip side of the coin we don’t have many of the events we normally spend money on, sending athletes to events and putting on our annual baseball tournament in August.”

Ms. Anning is philosophical about the funding from the events. “When you consider that we did without for so many years, we are thankful for the support we have received in recent years.”

Manitoulin Family Resources (MFR) also finds itself in reasonable shape despite the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, but the challenges come in the delivery of services to the clients they serve.

“We have had to cut out accepting donations to the Thrift Store for obvious reasons,” said MFR executive director Marnie Hall. “Most of our volunteers are also self-isolating and we don’t have the space to operate there responsibly and keep people six feet apart.”



But the organization has seen a marked increase in food donations and the assistance from the Manitoulin-Sudbury District Services Board has been “incredible,” added the MFR executive director. “We have also received 10 pallets of food through our partnership with Food Ontario. We also have a lot of community support,” she said. “The Island people really pull together in any time of crisis.”

Local businesses, many of them facing their own challenges, continue to step up to help support MFR’s efforts, she noted.

While the women’s shelter has not seen a marked rise in activity during the pandemic, Ms. Hall said she was concerned about what is happening in light of the increase in stress in the community and that fears of the pandemic might keep people in a dangerous situation. She anticipates that once the pandemic fears have passed a lot more will come to light but points out that MFR’s core service as a women’s shelter remains and that the organization has taken steps to ensure a safe environment for those who need it.

Manitoulin Streams also finds itself in relatively good shape funding wise, although the pandemic is making itself felt in other ways when it comes to doing the organization’s stream rehabilitation work on the Island.

“Most of our funding applications for this year were already approved,” said Manitoulin Streams project co-ordinator Seija Deschenes. “So that part is okay for now; we are only waiting on one application approval for this year.”

The cancellation of the 5th annual Jackets and Jeans gala that was to be held at the Manitoulin Hotel and Conference Centre was a big disappointment, but Ms. Deschenes said that the response of the sponsors has been very understanding.

Where the impact falls, however, is on the volunteers and the elbow grease that they apply to each project. “We have to do so much more with paid staff,” said Ms. Deschenes. “While there are some things we can safely do staying six feet apart, like the tree planting we have been spending 12 hours a day at for the past few days, we can’t expect to put volunteers at risk and that has really changed a lot about how we can get things done.”

Still, Manitoulin Streams has been undertaking several largescale projects, particularly in the West End this season, continuing the work that has seen the organization garner international recognition and being hailed for its best practices in stream and watershed rehabilitation and collaboration with private landowners.

“Of course we have had to cancel our school events and that has been an unfortunate thing as well,” said Ms. Deschenes.

While her efforts are focused on this year’s projects and that funding is secure, like many environmental and conservation groups the organization is well aware of the other shoe presented by the immense cost to government coffers by the pandemic.



St. Bernard's Roman Catholic Church has seen its collection plate tally plummet drastically while services have been cancelled, but thanks to the support of the congregation, particularly American parishioners who will likely not even be able to attend services at all this summer, the books remain healthy.

"I have been getting in touch with a lot of our American friends over the past several weeks and they have been incredibly generous," said Father George Gardner. "We are in pretty good shape right now."

Nationally the loss of fundraising activities, from large scale events to roadside lemonade stands is taking its toll hospital projects and organizations such as Ronald MacDonald House. Most volunteer staffed programming has had to be shuttered due to the pandemic, although some programs, such as music therapy programs are able to continue in an online format.

While the pandemic has limited the fundraising potential for many groups both in the cancellation of events and the loss of disposable income among much of the population, the need has not abated.

