



More Than a Day at the Farm: How Community Events Help End the Stigma of Homelessness

By Margaret Eskins
Executive Director DARS
Dedicated Advocacy Resource Support

Community events such as the recent DARS Family Fun Farm Day are about much more than food, games and an afternoon outdoors. They create opportunities for people from different circumstances to meet one another as neighbours. In doing so, they help challenge the assumptions and stigma that too often surround homelessness.

Homelessness is frequently discussed through statistics, headlines and images of people at their most vulnerable. Although public awareness is important, this limited picture can cause society to see homelessness as a person's identity rather than a difficult circumstance they are experiencing.

At DARS, we truly believe a person should never be defined by where they sleep or their current living situation. I remind our team often that many people are closer to becoming unhoused than they may realize, and that we must all remember: "There but for the grace of God go I."

People experiencing homelessness are parents, grandparents, friends, workers, veterans, artists, animal lovers and community members. They have talents, humour, hopes and stories. Many have experienced circumstances that could happen to almost anyone: the loss of employment, rising housing costs, illness, family breakdown, domestic violence, trauma or the death of someone they depended upon.

The DARS Family Fun Farm Day, held last weekend, provided a welcoming space where those labels began to disappear.

When people gather around a corn roast, meet the farm animals, listen to music, play games or watch children participate in activities, they are not divided into categories of "housed" and "homeless." They are simply people sharing an experience. Conversations begin naturally, common interests emerge and relationships form.

This kind of personal connection is one of the most effective ways to challenge stigma. It is much harder to hold onto a stereotype after sitting beside someone, sharing a meal, laughing together or hearing part of their story. Fear and judgment can be replaced by understanding. The person who may once have been viewed only as "a homeless individual" becomes a neighbour with a name, a personality and something meaningful to contribute.

The farm itself plays an important role. It offers open space, fresh air, animals, shared crops, honey from our hives and purposeful activities in a setting that feels less formal than an office or social-service environment. During this special day, people participated at their own comfort level. There was no pressure to explain their circumstances or identify themselves as needing assistance. Everyone was welcomed with dignity.

Events like Family Fun Farm Day are also valuable for children and young people. They offer families a gentle and age-appropriate opportunity to talk about homelessness, compassion and inclusion. Children learn that people experiencing hardship should not be feared, ignored or blamed. They learn that kindness includes saying hello, sharing space and recognizing that every person deserves safety and respect.

For people who have experienced homelessness or housing insecurity, being genuinely included in a community event can be deeply meaningful. Stigma often creates isolation and can make individuals feel invisible or unwelcome. A warm greeting, a shared activity or an invitation to sit at the same table can help rebuild confidence and restore a sense of belonging.

During the event, someone even asked one of our residents how he came to volunteer at DARS. Consider what that moment means. He woke up that morning as a resident of the DARS Farmhouse—a home for people transitioning out of homelessness—and went to sleep that night knowing that a neighbour had seen him not as someone experiencing homelessness, but as a valued member of the volunteer community.

These events also show the broader community what DARS represents. DARS does not simply respond to immediate needs. We work to create relationships, rebuild trust and remind people that they remain part of the community, regardless of their housing status. At the DARS Farmhouse, support is grounded in dignity, participation and the belief that everyone has strengths to offer.

The person a visitor assumed was one of our volunteers? He is a resident—and a grill master. Our honey bee demonstrator is a resident. The person greeting neighbours at the front gate is another cherished member of the DARS household. They were not simply recipients of support that day. They were hosts, teachers, volunteers and contributors to their community.

Community events cannot solve homelessness on their own. We still need affordable housing, adequate income supports, accessible health care and properly funded community services. However, lasting solutions also require a change in how people experiencing homelessness are perceived and treated.



Pickering's Next Council Must Be Ready for the Bill That's Coming

By John Meloche

Municipal budgets rarely make exciting reading. I know because I recently spent a considerable amount of time going through Pickering's capital budget and long-term forecasts. But buried inside hundreds of pages of numbers is a conversation I believe Pickering residents need to be having now: how do we continue building the city we want without losing control of what it costs?

Pickering's approved 2026 capital investment is approximately \$73.2 million. The City's own financing summary shows that 17.7 per cent is financed through debt, with another 10.3 per cent identified as development-charge debt. Debt itself is not automatically bad.

Cities borrow to build infrastructure that will last for decades. Roads, fire stations, recreation facilities and major civic infrastructure should not necessarily be paid entirely by the taxpayers who happen to live here in the year they are constructed. The concern is capacity.

Pickering is growing rapidly, and our list of capital requirements is growing with it. The City's Asset Management Plan identifies significant capital spending during the 2027–2029 period, including major renovations and rehabilitation of existing facilities.

At the same time, we are undertaking major new projects. The Seaton Recreation Complex and Library is a perfect example. I support investing in recreation and community infrastructure. A growing city needs these facilities. But Council has already directed staff to seek additional government funding, naming-rights revenue, efficiencies and other funding sources specifically to reduce the project's reliance on debt and property taxes.

That tells us something important: affordability matters even when the project itself is worthwhile.

Pickering has also benefited enormously from casino revenue. The City received \$16.38 million from OLG during the 2025–26 fiscal year and nearly \$76 million since the Pickering Casino Resort opened in July 2021.

That is an extraordinary advantage, but advantages should be used strategically, not treated as an excuse to become less disciplined.

My approach is simple.

Before approving major expenditures, Council should be asking: What is the full lifecycle cost? What will we borrow? What will the interest ultimately cost? What other projects are coming behind it? What happens if a forecasted revenue source changes? Could grants, sponsorships, naming rights or partnerships reduce the burden? And most importantly, what does this decision mean for the taxpayer five or ten years from now?

Residents should not need an accounting degree and several evenings of research to answer those questions.

I want Pickering to provide far more accessible, plain-language financial reporting — including understandable capital forecasts, debt projections and explanations showing residents not merely what something costs today, but how it will be financed tomorrow. That reflects the broader commitment I have made to transparent government and measurable taxpayer value.

Johns-Platform-ideas.txt

Fiscal responsibility does not mean saying no to everything.

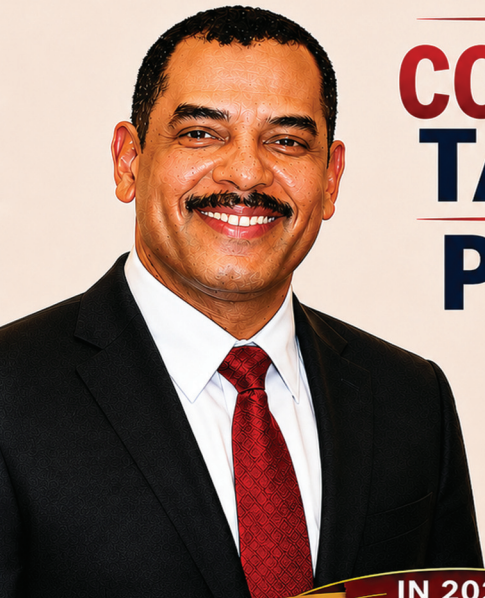
It means knowing when to say yes, understanding exactly what that yes will cost, and making sure tomorrow's taxpayers can afford the decisions we make today.

Pickering has tremendous opportunities ahead of it. Growth can bring new homes, new employers, better amenities and a stronger tax base.

But opportunity without financial discipline can become obligation very quickly.

The next Council will inherit some consequential financial decisions. Residents deserve councillors prepared to read beyond the headline numbers, ask difficult questions and explain the answers clearly.

That is the standard I believe every taxpayer should expect from City Hall.



MY CONTROLLED TAXATION PROMISE

Proud to be Canadian.

IN 2026
★ VOTE: ★

**ERROL
MASSIAH**

Regional Ward 3 Candidate – Ajax

416-918-7549
emassiah@rogers.com

EXPERIENCED
COMMITTED
TO AJAX
STRONGER TOGETHER
DEDICATED

As your new Regional Ward Councillor I promise to fight for
CONTROLLED TAXATION

VOTE ✓

HENRY

FOR MAYOR OF OSHAWA

(289) 913-6331

henryforoshawa.ca