

Courting new cash: Speed-funding event hooks up charities and potential donors

ROB FAULKNER

The Hamilton Spectator

Feb 2, 2008

If speed funding is like speed dating with grant money instead of dinner, the RBC Foundation's donations manager was like the captain of the high school football team yesterday morning.

More than a dozen charity and nonprofit workers surrounded James Temple, leaning in to hear what he had to say about how RBC doles out more than \$1 million a year in Hamilton.

"Yeah!" Temple says, smiling at the high school analogy.

At 15 other tables in the Liuna Station ballroom, funders like the Hamilton Community Foundation, the City of Hamilton and the Ontario Trillium Foundation are also on "first dates."

Circled by volunteers, the ballroom hosted a series of five sessions, each 25 minutes in length. Funders tell the hopefuls about their criteria, deadlines and intentions for grants. A brass bell on the head table clangs to end each session. Then, volunteers move to other tables, looking for another match.

"This way, we get to see a lot of organizations, which is good because we don't know all of them," explains Vince Isber, RBC regional vice-president for Hamilton. "We want to be more strategic with our donations," he says of the 1 per cent of its pre-tax profit the bank gives away.

Local speed-funding organizer Susan West, regional program manager at the Ontario Trillium Foundation, said the format arose here after the Hamilton Funders Network tried other events. The network, formed in 1998 by the city, Hamilton Community Foundation, Ontario Trillium Foundation and local United Way, had done workshops, open houses and seminars.

"We got the idea from speed dating," she said. "And last year, we had 250 people attend and they really liked it."

This year, 300 people pre-registered. The winter storm kept some away, so attendance was still-impressive at 150 people at Liuna Station.

"We're looking to see what we can do," said Debbie Bramer, Winona Peach Festival advertising chair. Last year, the festival partnered with City Kidz, giving inner-city kids free shirts and rides.

They happily had support from Robertson Amusements last year. This year, Bramer sat at the Ontario Trillium Foundation table, hoping to find new ways to keep the partnership going.

Of course, like any first date, you have hits and misses. Some hopefuls may have heard of passing deadlines. Or a funder requires you be a registered charity to get their cash.

The day's not about making a pitch for your specific project, but it certainly leads to deals.

Jim Hudson, executive director of the **Bay Area Restoration Council**, remembers the match he made at last year's inaugural speed-funding event.

Budget troubles at the Royal Botanical Gardens doomed an education project run by BARC, in which students grew marsh plants with snails in large bowls to learn about watersheds. The RBG couldn't send the \$2,000 to \$3,000 in native plants.

Hudson was worried.

That is, until he sat at the speed-funding table headed by Hamilton Teachers' Credit Union and heard that the marsh plant project fit with their interest in education. Two days later, he says, their promise of funding arrived.

It's the kind of tale that makes funders popular on speed-funding dates.

Sharon Charters, grants manager at Hamilton Community Foundation, says the format lets her put a name to a face and hear new ideas, before the HCF board doles out about \$6 million a year.

But as she grabs a tea during a short break, she also finds a fan.

"Grants manager?" a man beside her overhears at the coffee table. "I want to be your best friend! How about coffee? I don't want you to think I'm schmoozing you by taking you out for dinner right away."

She smiles, and says she drinks tea.

rfaulkner@thespec.com

905-526-2468