



Staff Report for Committee of the Whole Meeting

Date of Meeting: April 17, 2024

Report Number: SRPBS.24.017

Department: Planning and Building Services

Division: Policy Planning

**Subject: SRPBS.24.017 – 2023 Environment Strategy
Progress Report**

Purpose:

The purpose of this staff report is to provide Council with the 2023 *Greening the Hill*, Environment Strategy implementation annual update.

Recommendation(s):

- a) That Council receive Staff Report SRPBS.24.017, including the attached 2023 Environment Strategy Progress Tracker and 2023 Environment Strategy Highlight Sheet for information.

Contact Person:

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Report Approval:

Submitted by: Gus Galanis, Acting Commissioner of Planning and Building Services

Approved by: Darlene Joslin, City Manager

All reports are electronically reviewed and/or approved by the Division Director, Treasurer (as required), City Solicitor (as required), Commissioner, and City Manager. Details of the reports approval are attached.

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Background:

Introduction

Council approved an update to Richmond Hill's Environment Strategy, *Greening the Hill: Our Community, Our Future* in July 2022 (SRPI.22.068). The updated Environment Strategy builds upon Richmond Hill's enduring legacy of environmental leadership and stewardship and prioritizes opportunities for further corporate and community environmental improvements. The Environment Strategy issues a call to action for a more sustainable future, built on the principles of Greening our Consumption, Greening our Natural Spaces, and Greening our Growth. It contains 90 actions organized within 10 themes to be implemented by 2031.

This purpose of this report is to outline Environment Strategy (Strategy) implementation progress in 2023, as directed by Council. These accomplishments demonstrate the City's continued commitment to environmental action and are the result of cross-departmental, inter-municipal, and community collaboration.

Environment Strategy Progress in 2023

Below is a summary of 2023 accomplishments from each of the Strategy's themes led by various departments throughout the corporation. To view each of the Strategy's 90 actions, their status, and implementation progress in 2023, see Attachment 1, the 2023 Environment Strategy Progress Tracker. For a visual snapshot of notable 2023 achievements, see the 2023 Environment Strategy Highlight Sheet (Attachment 2).

Energy

In 2023, the City initiated programming to encourage residents to improve the energy efficiency of their homes. Key activities included:

- initiating a partnership with the City of Markham to study the feasibility of a home energy retrofit financing program that incentivizes home energy improvements;
- offering free Home Energy Retrofit Orientation (HERO) and Sealing Energy Leakages (SEL) webinars to residents, in partnership with the City of Markham, Humber College, and Enbridge Gas;
- launching a home energy improvement survey, including the opportunity for personalized guidance from an energy expert.
- providing residents with education on heat pumps, electric vehicles, and other sustainable home energy technologies at the City's 2023 Earth Day event; and,
- participating in the community-led "Heat Pumps Unveiled" event.

On the corporate side, implementation of the City's Corporate Energy Plan (CEP) continued. In 2023, staff rolled out energy efficiency measures recommended by the recommissioning studies completed at five arenas, completed heating and cooling system upgrades at Richmond Green Sports Complex, Rouge Woods Community Centre, and McConaghy Centre, and initiated recommissioning studies for the City's indoor swimming pool facilities. The City also initiated four Net Zero feasibility studies

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for various City facility types to understand the costs and measures needed to retrofit City facilities to achieve net zero greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. These studies will help inform actions included in the 2024 CEP update.

Transportation

The Transportation Master Plan (TMP) Update was completed and approved by Council in 2023. The updated TMP promotes active and sustainable transportation, transportation demand management (TDM) and emerging technologies. Key actions include establishing a Priority Active Transportation/Recreational Trail Spine route running north and east across Richmond Hill, along with prioritization lists for active transportation and trail improvement projects in the short and medium term. The TMP also recommends exploring emerging technologies through development of an Electric Vehicle Strategy and a Micromobility Strategy.

The City's Parking and Transportation Demand Management (TDM) Strategy was also substantially completed in 2023. The TDM Strategy aims to ensure appropriate parking supplies, promote sustainable transportation choices, reduce car dependency, and effectively accommodate electric vehicles.

In terms of active transportation infrastructure improvements, the Macleod Trail extension opened in November 2023, providing an 800 metre multi-use trail connection to the Oak Ridges Corridor Conservation Reserve spine trail. This project was undertaken through a tri-party funding partnership between Richmond Hill, Toronto and Region Conservation Authority (TRCA), and the Gray Foundation. Additional projects constructed include a multi-use path on Bethesda Road from Anchusa Drive to Leslie Street and the David Dunlap Observatory (DDO) Park Assignment #2 Trails in the wooded area. The City also received \$3.18 million in grant funding through the Federal Active Transportation Fund for the DDO Pedestrian/Cyclist Bridge and Recreation Trail project.

Water Resource Management and Water Conservation

Building upon the work completed in 2022, the City held an in-person Rain Gardens and Climate Change Open House in May 2023 with funding provided by ICLEI Canada's Advancing Adaptation program. The workshop helped residents learn about and discuss ways to adapt their home gardens to conserve water and mitigate climate change impacts.

Implementation of stormwater infrastructure improvements through the City's Stormwater Management 10-Year Capital Plan continued in 2023. Projects completed include:

- construction of Beaver Woodland Pond (27-2N);
- feasibility studies for Pomona Creek/Garden Ave, GM1 and South Richvale valleyland rehabilitation sites, and Driftwood Pond (8-2);
- pond sediment removal projects for Cedar Springs Pond (16-8) and Snively Plunge Pool;

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- environmental assessment for the Snively Wetland Outlet, Schomberg Culvert and Humber Flats Pond (1-4); and,
- a Storm Pond Function Assessment study.

In addition, ongoing water resource management and conservation initiatives continued in 2023, including implementation of the City's stormwater infrastructure monitoring and inspection program, Lake Wilcox Management Plan, Watershed Monitoring Program, Salt Management Plan, and Backwater Valve Subsidy Program. The City also identified priority locations for rehabilitation of sanitary infrastructure to reduce inflow and infiltration throughout Richmond Hill.

Sustainable Land Development

In 2023, the City continued development of a Community Improvement Plan Study for Affordable Housing and Sustainable Design, which will explore opportunities to incentivize and promote the implementation of sustainable design practices in development projects, including energy and GHG conservation in new buildings.

Corporately, the City advanced construction of the Minthorn Park Revitalization Project in 2023. With grant funding provided by ICLEI Canada, design for this project includes climate adaptation measures, such as rain gardens, naturalized areas, and increased tree plantings. In support of this work, signage has been installed to build community knowledge and understanding of the role these enhanced green infrastructure measures play within the urban context. The City also began exploring opportunities to improve energy efficiency and sustainable design for new City facilities, in alignment with our climate goals.

Natural Heritage and Urban Forest

The City continued promoting and enhancing its urban forest and natural heritage system in 2023. The benefits of Richmond Hill's urban forest were showcased through a new educational video which received a Platinum "Viddy" award in 2023. Through the Community Stewardship Program (CSP), 5.6 hectares of natural area was restored, 9,204 trees and shrubs were planted, 24 habitat enhancement structures were installed, 131 bags of garbage were removed, and 95 stewardship events and 6 webinars were hosted. In total, 25 schools, businesses, and community groups, and nearly 1,615 volunteers participated. Through the City's award-winning Healthy Yards Program, 1,305 trees and shrubs, 3,760 wildflowers, 300 rain barrels and 285 backyard composters were sold. The City also hosted 3 webinars to educate residents about incorporating native plants on their property.

Ecological restoration activities continued at Beaver Woodland, DDO Park (Phase 1 & 2), Elgin Mills Greenway, Phyllis Rawlinson Park and Saigeon Trail in 2023. Phase 3 at DDO Park commenced in August 2023, which includes meadow and woodland habitat creation and restoration. In addition, the City continued working with TRCA to complete restoration of four hectares of meadow within the Oak Ridges Corridor Conservation Reserve.

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Invasive Species

Four training sessions were held by the Ontario Invasive Plant Council in 2023 to build staff capacity and knowledge on invasive species identification and maintenance in parks and natural areas. In conjunction with the newly established Invasive Species Response Protocol, the training allowed staff to better detect and respond to the emergence of new invasive species in Richmond Hill. Public education on invasive species continued through information on the City's website and social media, through the delivery of community presentations, and via the Greening the Hill booth at public events. New display boards were created to educate and engage the community on invasive species at public events.

In 2023, the City continued removal and replacement of street trees as well as ecological restoration activities at Beaver Woodland and Saigeon Trail to manage the impacts of Emerald Ash Borer (EAB) on the City's ash trees. To reduce the impacts of spongy moth, the City distributed 360 burlap kits and continued providing education to residents. In addition, as part of the CSP, the City hosted 5 in-person invasive species management events where 33 bags of invasive plants were removed by community volunteers.

Wildlife

In 2023, the City received official Bird Friendly City (BFC) certification from Nature Canada. As part of BFC certification, the City proclaimed World Migratory Bird Day (WMBD) on May 13, 2023, held a WMBD webinar event in partnership with TRCA, and initiated the creation of a community-based Richmond Hill Bird Team. The City also held 4 bird-related educational webinars and launched an education campaign on threats to birds, focusing on light pollution, window collisions and outdoor cats. Display boards, pamphlets, and kids' activity sheets for this campaign were rotated throughout libraries and community centres across Richmond Hill.

To protect wildlife and their habitats, the City installed bat boxes during construction of West Beaver Creek Pond A, and rolling curbs and signage at Newman Avenue to facilitate turtle crossing. Wildlife connectivity was also considered and incorporated into the design for the DDO Pedestrian Bridge. Furthermore, in partnership with Ontario Streams, 24 in-stream habitat improvements were completed, and 133 bags of garbage were removed from our natural areas and streams in 2023.

Local Food and Pollinators

The City advanced efforts to support pollinators through several park projects, including ecological restoration at DDO Park, which began in 2023 and will result in 1.2 hectares of new meadow habitat to support pollinators once complete. Educational signage has been installed at the various entry points to the meadow area to allow the public to learn about the site. In addition, Town Park Master Plan, approved by Council in June 2023, includes direction to include a pollinator meadow. Similarly, the draft Mill Pond Park Revitalization Master Plan, received by Council in December 2023, includes direction to create a new feature pollinator garden and naturalized meadow habitat.

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The Community Garden Policy (Policy) was updated to expand the opportunities and locations for gardens across the City. This includes allowing for gardens in alternate outdoor spaces, such as boulevards, right of ways and within traffic islands on a case-by-case basis pending approval by the City. Through the Policy, two new collective community gardens were installed in 2023 focusing on food production for the local community. The Kids Right to Know Community Garden located in Spadina Parkette, for example, provides weekly donations to local food banks and educational opportunities for their volunteers.

Through its Healthy Yards Program and the Richmond Hill Blooms Program, the City promoted pollinator friendly gardens and yards by providing educational webinars on native plants, pollinators and home-grown food, as well as subsidized native plant kits available for residents to purchase. An educational in-person event was held through the Richmond Hill Blooms Program which hosted booths with gardening experts and environmental professionals. The City also ran a social media campaign educating residents on best practices for a healthy natural yard. Educational signage identifying overwinter pollinator habitat was added to select gardens across the City in 2023.

Waste

A record-setting 12,000 residents, community groups, schools, businesses, staff and members of Council participated in the City's Clean Up, Green Up Weeks in spring 2023. Together, volunteers cleaned 145 streets and pathways, and more than 100 parks and open spaces. As a result of this success, Richmond Hill received the 2023 Silver Award for Promotion and Education in the Special Events category from the Municipal Waste Association. This award recognizes our Clean Up, Green Up Weeks program for its creativity and impact on reducing litter and waste.

To reduce single-use plastics (SUP), the City provided education to the community, as well staff and vendors at City facilities and events. This included in-person engagement with food and beverage vendors at RibFest to assess compliance with policy requirements and identify areas for improvement. The City also reduced reliance on single-use water bottles through participation of its "Fill it Up" water trailer at 35 City, Community, and Council-Led events in 2023. The trailer served more than 80,000 residents and filled approximately 20,000 reusable water bottles.

The City continued to collaborate with York Region to advance the circular economy and encourage reuse in 2023. Efforts include promoting the "Share Reuse Repair Hub", a community-based virtual hub to educate and engage residents on advancing the circular economy by sharing, reusing, and repairing items. During Circular Economy Month (October), the City actively supported York Region's survey, webinar, and social media campaign, which encouraged residents to share feedback and ideas to further enhance the circular economy. The City also supported York Region's SUP efforts, including a webpage with resources for businesses to reduce single-use items as well as a "Single-Use Innovation Challenge" which provided funding for non-profits and other organizations with community-driven approaches to help reduce single-use items.

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Communicating the Environment Strategy

Community engagement and education has been crucial to the development and implementation of Richmond Hill's Environment Strategy. The City will continue to educate, engage, and build relationships with residents, businesses, and community groups to inspire further environmental action. In 2023, the City continued to communicate the Strategy and support implementation by providing environmental education and outreach to the community, including the following activities in 2023:

- creating and sharing content on *Greening the Hill* and corporate social media accounts (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram) to promote the City's environmental achievements, current programs, and opportunities to participate;
- participating at environmental events, including the Spring Greening Fair, and City, community, and Council-led events;
- developing environmental education materials, communications pieces, and outreach activities for staff and the community; and,
- participating in environmental community liaison meetings, speaking engagements and collaboration with community groups, local schools and youth to listen to concerns and promote participation in City environmental initiatives.

Next Steps

Throughout 2024, staff will continue to deliver on the Environment Strategy's commitments. This includes continued staff collaboration through the internal Environment Strategy Steering Committee, as well as ongoing annual progress tracking and data collection for the City's Environmental Scorecard (released every 5 years; next Scorecard to capture 2020-2024 environmental trends).

Financial/Staffing/Other Implications:

There are no direct financial implications resulting from this staff report.

Relationship to Council's Strategic Priorities 2020-2022:

Implementation of the Environment Strategy strongly aligns with Council's Strategic Priorities. The Strategy complements and supports the City's long-term planning for sustainable development aimed at *Balancing Growth and Green*. It sets a course to green our consumption, natural spaces, and growth, while helping lay the foundation for the City's climate change initiatives.

The Strategy helps foster a *Strong Sense of Belonging* by creating opportunities for people to experience and immerse themselves within the City's natural environment and take part in stewardship programs. The Strategy also promotes the improvement of connections for *Getting around the City* through our built and natural environment (e.g. trails, bike lanes, natural corridors and greenspaces) and encourages sustainable transportation solutions (e.g. transit and active transportation).

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Environment Strategy actions demonstrate *Fiscal Responsibility* by promoting initiatives that reduce waste and encourage efficiency (e.g. energy and water efficiency improvements and waste diversion) and supporting work to improve resiliency and avoid risks and costs associated with the impacts of climate change.

Climate Change Considerations:

Implementation of the Strategy, along with annual progress tracking and reporting, directly enables and supports the City's climate change mitigation and adaptation efforts. Climate change considerations are woven into each of its 10 themes. This includes actions aimed at reducing corporate and community GHG emissions (e.g. actions within the Energy, Transportation, Water Conservation, Sustainable Land Development, and Waste themes), as well as measures to improve climate resiliency (e.g. actions within the Water Resource Management, Natural Heritage and Urban Forest, Wildlife, Invasive Species, and Local Food and Pollinators themes).

Conclusion:

Richmond Hill's Environment Strategy, *Greening the Hill: Our Community, Our Future* provides a roadmap to continue the City's legacy of environmental stewardship and improvement. This staff report and its attachments demonstrate how Strategy implementation progressed in 2023. These accomplishments illustrate Richmond Hill's continued commitment to become a more sustainable and resilient community – one that values the environment and makes active decisions to protect it in our daily lives.

Attachments:

The following attached documents may include scanned images of appendixes, maps and photographs. All attachments have been reviewed and made accessible. If you require an alternative format please call the contact person listed in this document.

- Attachment 1 – 2023 Environment Strategy Progress Tracker
- Attachment 2 – 2023 Environment Strategy Highlight Sheet

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Report Approval Details

Document Title:	SRPBS.24.017-2023 Environment Strategy Progress Update.docx
Attachments:	- SRPBS.24.017-Attachment 1-2023 Environment Strategy Progress (AODA).pdf - SRPBS.24.017-Attachment 2-2023 Highlight Sheet.pdf
Final Approval Date:	Mar 28, 2024

This report and all of its attachments were approved and signed as outlined below:

Maria Flores - Mar 27, 2024 - 12:02 PM

Gus Galanis - Mar 27, 2024 - 12:59 PM

Darlene Joslin - Mar 28, 2024 - 9:28 AM