



Staff Report for Budget Committee of the Whole Meeting

Date of Meeting: September 24, 2024

Report Number: SRCFS.24.044

Department: Corporate and Financial Services

Division: Financial Services

Subject: **SRCFS.24.044 – 2025 Budget Survey Results**

Purpose:

To provide an update on the 2025 Budget Survey Results, which were a part of the 2025 Budget Engagement Plan to educate, inform and engage the public on the budget, while also soliciting feedback on Richmond Hill's overall budget process and how City tax dollars are spent.

Recommendations:

- a) That staff report SRCFS.24.044 – 2025 Budget Survey Results be received for information purposes and for consideration in the upcoming staff proposed 2025 Budget; and
- b) That any future budget engagements continue with an online survey to solicit feedback, in addition to promoting the budget and its overall process through various digital and social media channels.

Contact Persons:

- Lisa Chen, Manager, Financial Planning and Analysis, ext. 6311
- Andrew Li, Financial Management Advisor, ext. 3646
- Gigi Li, Director of Financial Services and Treasurer, ext. 6435
- Sherry Adams, Commissioner of Corporate & Financial Services, ext. 2521

Report Approval:

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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Key Messages:

- The 2025 Budget Survey was widely promoted to engage the public and solicit feedback for staff and Council's consideration. The survey was available from June 29 to August 17.
- Almost 400 responses were received and the survey results indicate that:
 - ✓ Approximately half of the respondents (47%) utilize the City's webpage (Richmondhill.ca) as their primary source of information regarding the City's budget.
 - ✓ Approximately half of the respondents (47%) agree or strongly agree that the City provided services represent good value for the property taxes paid.
 - ✓ For the majority of City services, respondents overwhelmingly selected services levels should be maintained, as opposed to enhanced or reduced. The only City service which had enhanced as the most selected option was 'Investments in future renewal of City assets'.
 - ✓ 45% of respondents believe that the City should maintain the same level of services with a reasonable property tax increase to account for inflationary pressures while 32% believe the City should increase levels of services, through additional user fees or property tax increases.
 - ✓ In 2024, the property tax increase resulted in a \$95.28 increase in the average single detached residential property's tax bill. 61% of respondents believe that this increase is about right, as opposed to being too high or too low.
- Overall, between the City's webpage and social media posts across the various channels (e.g. Facebook, X (Twitter)), the City generated 19,556 impressions across all social media platforms for the reporting dates.
- Staff recommend future budget engagements to follow a similar platform, using an online survey to solicit feedback, in addition to promoting the budget and its overall process through various digital and social media channels.

Background:

This report is a follow up to the June 11, 2024, Budget Committee of the Whole meeting, where staff presented a report outlining the 2025 Budget Engagement Plan (SRCFS.24.023). The report highlighted a plan to enhance the public's understanding of the Richmond Hill budget through a refresh of the City's budget webpage combined with increased budget engagement efforts. Over the summer, the City held three staff led in-person budget information sessions for the public and launched a budget survey for public feedback (opened between June 29 and August 17). This staff report will mainly focus on the budget survey results and plans for future budget engagement efforts.

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Discussion:

2025 Budget Survey Launch

Staff promoted the budget survey through online, virtual, telephone and in-person channels. This provided residents and the public an opportunity to provide feedback and valuable input into the City's budget process and understand the difficult choices the City makes.

Online and Virtual Initiatives

The survey was promoted through organic promotions and paid advertising using RichmondHill.ca/Budget, a QR code, newsletters, social media, posters and multilingual digital campaign through YorkRegion.com.

Richmond Hill newsletters included those from Recreation and Culture Services, the Richmond Hill Public Library, RH e-news and Mayor and Council members. Posters and outdoor promotional displays were posted on the website and community centres, and staff encouraged the business community to share the survey link to their respective memberships.

Telephone

A dedicated telephone line was available and advertised in promotional materials for those who preferred to complete the survey through the telephone.

In-person events

The three in-person events were held at different times and events/venues over the summer to ensure engagement with a wide-range of demographics and to accommodate the public with multiple opportunities to attend. The events and dates selected were:

1. Canada Day (Richmond Green) – July 1, 2024
2. Concerts in the Park (Mill Pond Park) – July 18, 2024
3. Richmond Hill Public Library (Central Branch) – August 10, 2024

Financial Services and Communications staff prepared informational posters and interactive activities for a Budget booth at each of the various events and were present to educate, inform and engage with individuals who had questions or comments about the budget and overall budget process. Residents were encouraged to complete the survey during the events. The most common feedback received during these events is the new awareness that the property tax bill increase is determined by three different government bodies – City of Richmond Hill, Regional Municipality of York and the York Region School Boards.

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Promotions and Advertising

Overall, between the City's webpage and social media posts across the various channels (e.g. Facebook, X (Twitter)), the City generated 19,556 impressions (the number of times that your content/ad is displayed) across all social media platforms for the reporting dates, June 29 to August 17, 2024. See Social Media Report (Appendix 'B') for the full reach of the 2025 Budget Engagement Plan.

Comparatively, engagement was highest amongst the digital channels versus in-person events, which had lower participation and response rates. In consideration of the resources and efforts expended versus results, the most effective way of engagement and promotion is through online platforms.

Staff recommend future budget engagements to follow a similar platform, using an online survey to solicit feedback, in addition to promoting the budget and its overall process through various digital and social media channels.

2025 Budget Survey Results

Overall, between the three events and the other promotional channels (e.g. webpage, digital ads, etc.) used to promote the survey, the City received 391 completed surveys (See Appendix 'A' for complete results). Approximately 90 were completed during the in-person events, and there were no telephone surveys requested. Below is a summary of the quantitative survey findings with the bullet number corresponding to the survey question number.

General

1. Approximately half of the respondents (47%) utilize the City's webpage (Richmondhill.ca) as their primary source of information regarding the City's budget.
2. Approximately half of the respondents (47%) agree or strongly agree that the City provided services represent good value for the property taxes paid. With 28% selecting neutral and 25% either disagreeing or strongly disagreeing.

City Services

3. For the majority of City services, respondents overwhelmingly selected services levels should be maintained, as opposed to enhanced or reduced. The only City service which had enhanced as the most selected option was 'Investments in future renewal of City assets'. Refer to Appendix 'A' – Question 3 for specific details.

Tax Rate Changes

4. 45% of respondents believe that the City should maintain the same level of services with a reasonable property tax increase to account for inflationary pressures while 32% believe the City should increase levels of services, through additional user fees or property tax increases.

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5. In 2024, the Richmond Hill portion of the property tax increase resulted in a \$95.28 increase in the average single detached residential property's tax bill. 61% of respondents believe that this increase is about right, as opposed to being too high or too low.

Asset Renewal Priorities

6. The City will face significant costs to maintain current infrastructure in the same condition over the next 10 years. Half of the respondents (50%) would prefer that the City prioritize the infrastructure in the worse condition first rather than extending the number of years of the assets (19%) or increasing funding to ensure they are all in good to very good condition (19%).
7. Respondents were asked to prioritize the 7 infrastructure asset categories listed, with the majority focusing on the core infrastructure as the three highest priorities: roads/sidewalks as the highest, followed by watermains/sewers and stormwater management ponds were third. Refer to Appendix 'A' – Question 7 for specific details.

Demographics

8. Approximately 90% of the respondents either live or owned a Richmond Hill property. Also, the majority of respondents (56%) were between the ages of 40-64 years of age.

Additional Budget Feedback

Throughout the budget survey respondents were able to provide additional comments related to a specific question or of a general nature. The comments are summarized in Table 1 for staff and Council's consideration during 2025 Budget deliberations. It is important to note that since comments were not mandatory, bias may be present in the comments as only 157 or 40% of respondents provided the 306 comments. From the total comments provided, 43% were from respondents that answered they did not see value in the property taxes they paid.

From the positive comments, residents appreciate the parks, recreational facilities and specific services such as snow removal and waste management. Parks and trails are highlighted as being well-maintained, and there is a positive perception of recreational services, especially in comparison to other municipalities. Some direct quotes include:

"Great parks, well maintained roads and parks and trails and tennis and basketball courts and soccer fields."

"Dependable waste management pickup. Very much appreciate the services provided in Richmond Hill."

"When a water main burst on a street close by, a maintenance crew was on-site quickly to fix it".

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Table 1: Budget Feedback

Area (Respondents, % of Respondents)	Feedback Summary
Financial (61, 16%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify wastage, negotiate better service value, and prioritize the budget to focus on high-priority areas. • References to property taxes being higher compared to surrounding areas, with some suggesting that Richmond Hill's taxes are relatively low but still warrant careful management. • Ensure that increases in home values are balanced with fair tax rates and adequate services. • Explore alternative ways to fund services without relying on increasing property taxes, such as increasing developer contributions or selling city properties. Implement user fees where appropriate and look for savings through automation and improved processes. • Rising property taxes will drive residents away, and there's frustration with the perceived lack of effective use of funds. • Frustration over increasing property taxes without a corresponding improvement in service quality. Concerns that tax dollars are not being spent effectively or efficiently.
Capital Planning (52, 13%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintaining existing infrastructure to prevent higher future costs. • Capital works planned thoughtfully to avoid piecemeal work. • Avoid debt-inducing projects. • Hold contractors and city staff accountable for poor workmanship and budget overruns.
Parks and Recreation (45, 12%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Residents appreciate the parks and recreational facilities. • Invest in community centers and recreational programs, especially those that can serve growing populations and improve the quality of life. • Suggestions to build more outdoor recreational facilities including rinks, pools, baseball diamonds, soccer fields, indoor tennis courts, an outdoor archery range, cricket fields, and more fenced-off-leash dog parks. • Ensure parks and recreational facilities are well-maintained and updated. Update and modernize older parks. The current condition of sports fields, particularly at Richmond Green, has deteriorated. • Parks, particularly in South Richvale, are criticized for poor maintenance, including dead trees, overgrown shrubs, and lack of by-law enforcement. • Trails maintenance has declined since COVID, and more sidewalks are needed to make Richmond Hill more walkable. • Complaints about deteriorating conditions of baseball diamonds
Roads (25, 6%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continue investing in road repairs and upgrades. Address issues like potholes and poor road conditions to maintain safety and quality. • Specific roads like Bayview and areas in Oak Ridges are highlighted as needing significant improvement.

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Area (Respondents, % of Respondents)	Feedback Summary
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A crosswalk is needed at Bayview and Bethesda due to safety concerns. Traffic lights on Yonge Street need to be smarter and adjust based on real-time traffic conditions. • Enhance the railway on Elgin Mills with a bridge and addressing issues with construction and utility companies affecting roads. • Focus on improving traffic flow and pedestrian infrastructure. • Money spent on feasibility studies for roads like Bantry and Briggs or on bike lanes in low-traffic areas is wasted. • Enhance infrastructure for non-automobile transport (e.g., bicycle lanes, bicycle parking, sidewalks) to reduce car dependency and promote walkability. • Spending on bike lanes and parking is seen as wasteful in some areas. • Concerns about newly constructed sidewalks breaking down too soon. The need for better-quality materials. • Replace removed trees, maintain boulevard grass, and address overgrowth on sidewalks.
Land-Use Planning (24, 6%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limit high-density projects and ensure developers contribute to the necessary infrastructure. • Balance new development with adequate planning for supporting services and infrastructure.
Winter Maintenance (19, 5%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dissatisfaction with snow windrow clearing service, with complaints of being wasteful, infrequent, late and of poor quality causing additional work for homeowners. • Suggestion that funds should be redirected from windrow clearing to better park maintenance and other services. • Some advocate for reducing or eliminating the windrow program, with exceptions for seniors who need it. • Request to maintain paved trails and walkways during winter months. • Sidewalks aren't adequately cleared of snow, which often gets pushed onto driveways, creating extra work for homeowners.
Reducing overhead or increasing investments in Technology (17, 4%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improve customer service and make public services more efficient through technology. • Improve productivity and find efficiencies in city services. • Too many staff / Council members.
Cleanliness (15, 4%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Address cleanliness issues in public spaces, including trash collection and maintenance of green areas. Ensure regular upkeep of city properties to enhance the city's appearance and livability. • Modernized plazas and better care for public areas, including grass cutting and debris removal. • Concerns about inadequate garbage collection from public bins, poor maintenance of parks, and debris around manholes causing local flooding.

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Area (Respondents, % of Respondents)	Feedback Summary
By-Law or Property Standard Enforcement (14, 4%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase by-law enforcement to address property maintenance, short-term rentals, absentee landlords and parking violations. • Address cleanliness and safety in parks and roads. • Desire for stricter enforcement of property maintenance by homeowners to improve neighborhood cleanliness and safety.
Environment or Clean Water (12, 3%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduce the use of salt during winter to protect fresh water sources and reduce environmental impact. • Invest in climate adaptation and green infrastructure (e.g., solar panels, green spaces) to enhance long-term resilience and reduce future costs. • Concerns about the City's preparedness for climate change, especially regarding stormwater management in parks, creeks, and homes on floodplains. Residents are urging the city to take action on flood mitigation efforts. • More trees, green spaces, and bike paths, as well as the improvement of housing infrastructure to accommodate future environmental needs.
Regional, Provincial and Federal government policies (27, 7%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A number of comments provided feedback on budgets and policies that are not within the City's control.

Budget Communication and Timelines

City staff are currently preparing the 2025 budgets for presentation to the Budget Committee of the Whole later this fall. The feedback received from the survey has been reviewed with the City's Executive Leadership Team and will be taken into consideration as the City finalizes the draft budgets over the upcoming months.

On November 6, the Budget Book will be available on the budget webpage and an evening Public Information Session will be hosted by staff. This meeting will provide information to the public on what is considered in the staff proposed budget.

Following Mayoral Decision 11-24, the Committee will provide feedback and make recommendations to the Mayor on the staff proposed budget, the Mayor will table the budget at the December 11, 2024 Council meeting.

Once adopted, a media release will be issued along with a social media campaign, and the updated Budget Book will continue to be used as communication tool throughout the 2025 Budget year.

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Financial Implications:

The financial impact of addressing the budget survey results will be discussed during budget deliberations through November 2024 Budget Committee of the Whole meetings.

Relationship to Strategic Plan 2024-2027:

Engaging the community will improve the outcomes of the 2025 capital planning process as it relates to Pillar 3, Strengthening our Foundations, specifically, Priority 1, Make decisions that are evidence based and data driven to enable the City's long term financial sustainability, as well as social, environmental and economic sustainability.

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.

- Appendix A – Richmond Hill Budget Survey Results
- Appendix B – Social Media Report

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Report Approval Details

Document Title:	SRCFS.24.044 2025 Budget Survey Results.docx
Attachments:	- SRCFS.24.044 Appendix A - RH Budget Survey Results.pdf - SRCFS.24.044 Appendix B - Social Media Report.pdf
Final Approval Date:	Sep 18, 2024

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

Gigi Li - Sep 18, 2024 - 1:44 PM

Sherry Adams - Sep 18, 2024 - 2:28 PM

Darlene Joslin - Sep 18, 2024 - 2:48 PM