



## **Staff Report for Committee of the Whole Meeting**

**Date of Meeting:** April 16, 2025

**Report Number:** SRPBS.25.022

**Department:** Planning and Building Services

**Division:** Policy Planning

**Subject:** SRPBS.25.022 – 2024 Environment Strategy  
Progress Report

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### **Purpose:**

The purpose of this staff report is to provide Council with the 2024 *Greening the Hill* Environment Strategy implementation annual update.

### **Recommendation(s):**

- a. That Council receive Staff Report SRPBS.25.022, including the attached 2024 Environment Strategy Progress Tracker and 2024 Environment Strategy Highlight Sheet for information purposes and that all comments be referred back to staff.

### **Contact Person(s):**

- Myles O'Brien, Sustainability Coordinator, ext. 5464
- Ruth Rendon, Manager of Sustainability, ext. 2420
- Maria Flores, Director of Policy Planning, ext. 5438
- Gus Galanis, Commissioner of Planning and Building Services, ext. 2465

### **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.

## Page 2

### Key Messages:

- Richmond Hill's 2014 Environment Strategy (the "Strategy") defines goals and actions for protecting the natural environment to 2031.
- The 2022 Strategy Update incorporates urban growth and climate change as key factors, aligning with other high-level City plans and policies.
- Implementation of the Strategy is collaborative, and relies on leadership, partnerships, community involvement, and innovation.
- In 2024, Richmond Hill continued to successfully implement the Strategy.

### Background:

Richmond Hill's Environment Strategy establishes a vision to protect, enhance and restore the natural environment by fulfilling municipal obligations, responding to community priorities, and pursuing emerging opportunities.

The 2022 Council-approved Strategy Update (SRPI.22.068) builds upon Richmond Hill's legacy of environmental leadership and stewardship and emphasizes the increasing relevance of urban development and climate change. The Strategy's organizing principles – Greening our Consumption, Greening our Natural Spaces, and Greening our Growth – reflect these current priorities and guide the 90 actions to be implemented by 2031.

The purpose of this report is to outline Environment Strategy implementation progress in 2024, as directed by Council. In addition, the report highlights links between Strategy implementation and related portfolios under the Sustainability banner (e.g. climate change, sustainable development, and natural environment/urban forest).

### Discussion:

#### Environment Strategy Implementation

Underlying the Strategy is a holistic understanding of sustainability, one which recognizes the interconnections between environmental, economic, and social issues. Implementing the actions in the Strategy therefore depends on collaboration between various internal departments, and between the City, residents, businesses, and other key partners. Ongoing coordination with related plans and initiatives is essential for realizing the Strategy's objectives and ensuring its benefits are shared across the community. The Strategy's broad, multi-faceted scope makes it an important bridge between the global (e.g., United Nations Sustainable Development Goals) and local (e.g., community environmental and climate groups) levels.

The updated Strategy focuses squarely on urban growth and climate change. Accordingly, its intentions and implementation are aligned with the City's Official Plan Update, Climate Change Framework, Community Energy and Emissions Plan (CEEP), and Urban Forest Management Plan (UFMP). Many of the Strategy's actions (e.g.

## **Page 3**

reducing waste, conserving water, protecting wildlife, enabling local food, etc.) work in tandem with creating healthy, low-carbon, walkable communities, supported by natural and built infrastructure that is resilient to climate impacts.

Ultimately, successful implementation of the Strategy hinges on leadership, partnerships, community involvement, and innovation as follows:

### Leadership

A steering committee with Managers and Directors from across the organization continues to guide implementation, meeting biannually to provide updates and ensure alignment with departmental workplans. As of 2024, this committee also oversees CEEP implementation. The Mayor and Council play a key role in demonstrating and reinforcing the City's sustainability commitments, through community events, networking, and broader initiatives such as the Urban Economy Forum (UEF) Canada Frontrunner Program.

In 2024, Richmond Hill received the Ontario Nature Municipal Award, a strong endorsement of the City's ongoing and effective environmental leadership.

### Partnerships

Richmond Hill continues to work successfully with a range of partners to pursue specific Strategy actions and to explore new opportunities. Relationships with UEF and United Nation University are strengthening the City's capacity for sustainable development and introducing new avenues for action. Partnering with businesses, agencies, non-profits, and other municipalities remains critical for Strategy implementation.

### Community Involvement

Equally important is ongoing engagement with the Richmond Hill community. Residents are increasingly involved in local environmental initiatives such as Spring clean ups, citizen science, education sessions, etc., and are actively collaborating with the City to find solutions and drive progress on our sustainability agenda.

### Innovation

Building a sustainable city in light of rapid urban growth and climate change requires innovation. In 2024, Richmond Hill applied several innovative solutions to its assets, including rain gardens in public parks (to help control stormwater and support pollinators), net-zero design features for the repurposed Connor Building (to reduce natural gas consumption and increase energy efficiency), and electric vehicles and charge stations at the Operations Centre (to cut Fleet emissions and costs).

## Page 4

### 2024 Environment Strategy Progress Updates

Below is a summary of 2024 accomplishments from each of the Strategy's themes led by various departments throughout the corporation. Attachment 1 - 2024 Environment Strategy Progress Tracker lists the Strategy's 90 actions, their status, and recent implementation progress. Attachment 2 - 2024 Environment Strategy Highlight Sheet provides a visual snapshot of notable achievements from last year.

#### Energy

Using energy efficiently and cleanly can help lower costs, reduce air pollution, and cut greenhouse gas emissions. In 2024, the City continued efforts to engage with residents about their home energy options by offering free HERO (Home Energy Retrofit Orientation) webinars in partnership with the Cities of Markham and Vaughan, Humber College, and Enbridge Gas. Staff also worked with a home energy consultant to conduct 171 resident surveys and 44 follow-up interviews, to learn more about barriers to and opportunities for residential energy retrofits.

Richmond Hill's updated Corporate Energy Plan (2024-2029) now specifically aligns with the CEEP by including a net-zero GHG emissions target for City-owned facilities. This update was guided by net-zero feasibility studies conducted for five facilities. Staff also set a progressive energy and emissions target for new City facilities (over 500 m<sup>2</sup>), requiring a minimum 25% improvement in energy efficiency over Ontario Building Code standards and aligning with Richmond Hill's Sustainability Metrics Program. Finally, staff initiated a pilot project for the repurposed Connor Building, incorporating net-zero measures into its design for future monitoring, learning, and application to other buildings.

#### Transportation

The way people move around the city has significant implications for the natural environment, climate change, and our quality of life. Shifting away from single-occupant gas/diesel vehicles toward electric vehicles, active transportation (walking, cycling), micromobility (e-bikes, e-scooters) and shared modes (public transit, carpooling) is a key priority for the community, as reflected in the Transportation Master Plan Update, Office Plan Update, and CEEP.

In 2024, Richmond Hill:

- initiated a Micromobility Strategy, to explore the City's role in expanding and managing this emerging transportation option;
- initiated an Electric Vehicle Strategy, to determine the feasibility of charging stations at certain City facilities;
- purchased and installed six additional Level 2 chargers at the Operations Centre, bringing the total on-site number to ten. These are dedicated to the ten electric Chevrolet Equinox fleet vehicles purchased in 2024;
- completed 500 metres of the Bethesda Sideroad multi-use path (part of the Lake to Lake Cycling Route and Walking Trail), over 6 km of bike lanes through the Traffic

## Page 5

Safety and Operations Study traffic calming updates, and cycling facilities on the Orlando Avenue Flyover, providing an east-west connection over Highway 404; and,

- continued development of the Priority Active Transportation and Recreation Trail Spine route, with design and consultation work on the Oxford-Direzze extension (a trail that will provide connections to natural heritage, parks, cycling infrastructure, and public transit).

### **Water Resource Management and Water Conservation**

Managing water use and our impacts on lakes, rivers, and streams is critical for overall ecosystem health. As well, our ability to manage stormwater is increasingly important to the community as extreme weather related to climate change brings heavier storms and more precipitation.

Implementation of the City's Stormwater Management 10-Year Capital Plan continued in 2024, with rehabilitation projects completed for Garden Avenue and Don Head East valleylands. Other ongoing water resources initiatives include:

- Stormwater Infrastructure Monitoring and Inspection Program;
- Lake Wilcox Management Plan;
- Watershed Monitoring Program;
- Salt Management Plan; and,
- Backwater Valve Subsidy Program.

Staff also continued to monitor and enforce the Sewer-use By-law and inspect and address blockages through the sanitary effluent sampling program, helping reduce the potential for hazardous spills on land and in our water.

In 2024, staff completed the revitalization of Minthorn Park, which now includes two rain gardens that will help capture runoff and act as demonstration sites for residents to learn about this climate adaptation option. Staff designed and published a "Build Your Own Rain Garden Resident Guide" on the City website to encourage rain gardens on private lands. Another new rain garden was added to Dorothy Price Park as part of the Bedford Park Avenue road reconstruction.

### **Sustainable Land Development**

As Richmond Hill grows, there is an opportunity to develop communities with sustainability and resilience in mind. In 2024, staff completed a Community Improvement Plan (CIP) for Affordable Housing and Sustainable Design. This CIP, approved by Council in November, establishes financial programs to incentivize housing that is both affordable and sustainable thereby contributing to the socio-economic and environmental health of our community. New developments (private and non-profit) must meet the Silver performance level of the City's Sustainability Metrics Program to be considered for CIP funding.

## Page 6

In 2024, Council approved the City's Asset Management Plan, which includes climate change as a standard consideration when planning for asset renewal and replacement.

In addition to the preceding, Richmond Hill continued to add sustainable features to its own facilities, including:

- roof replacement with improved resilience at Rouge Woods Community Centre;
- HVAC improvements at Bond Lake Arena; and,
- multi-phase HVAC replacement project at Central Library (initiated).

### **Natural Heritage and Urban Forest**

A connected network of green space and forest provides a vital foundation for ecosystem, community, and individual health. Its numerous services (e.g. shade/cooling, water absorption, and CO<sub>2</sub> storage) play key roles in the City's response to climate change.

In 2024, Richmond Hill was again recognized as a Tree City of the World and received the Ontario Nature Lee Symmes Municipal Award for success in managing and growing its urban forest canopy cover. These achievements are based on forward-thinking policies, well-resourced programs, and collaboration between staff, residents, and community partners. The City also worked with Ontario Nature to identify over 550 hectares of public lands that will be counted toward Canada's commitment to protect 30% of land and water by 2030, under the international "30x30" initiative. As well, Richmond Hill initiated a partnership with Fleming College to develop an equitable approach to canopy cover distribution and completed a Natural Area Inventory with the Toronto and Region Conservation Authority (TRCA) to support strategic management of City lands and invasive species.

The Community Stewardship Program continued to build, restore, and protect natural heritage on public lands, with:

- 3.6 hectares of natural area restored, and 184 bags of garbage removed;
- 9,173 trees and shrubs planted, and 28 habitat enhancement structures installed;
- 89 stewardship events and 6 webinars hosted;
- 3845 volunteer hours (schools, businesses, and community groups);
- \$239,500 leveraged from partners (e.g., LEAF, Ontario Streams, TRCA); and,
- \$102,000 in funding from York Region.

The Healthy Yards Program continued to build natural heritage on private lands, with:

- 1,188 trees and shrubs and 3,520 wildflowers sold at subsidized rates;
- 300 rain barrels and 200 backyard composters sold;
- 2 workshops and 1 webinar hosted to educate residents about native plants; and,
- \$12,000 in partnership funding was provided by York Region.

## **Page 7**

Ecological restoration activities continued at Beaver Woodland, David Dunlap Observatory (DDO) Park (Phase 1, 2 and 3), Elgin Mills Greenway, Phyllis Rawlinson Park and Saigeon Trail. The development of an ecological restoration plan for Rouge River Headwaters Valleys and Trail began in 2024.

Finally, the City released its award-winning video on protecting the urban forest, used social media campaigns to raise awareness about trees in our community, and initiated the Urban Forest Public Education and Engagement Strategy (with expected completion in 2025).

### **Invasive Species**

The spread of invasive species, which can damage property, infrastructure and ecological integrity, is amplified by global trade/travel and climate change. Richmond Hill is continuing to develop capacity for managing this issue.

In 2024, staff published an invasive species field guide for outdoor City workers, to complement the Invasive Species Response Protocol and training completed in 2023. Staff also developed an internal procedure and online fact sheet for developers and consultants about preventing the introduction and establishment of Oak Wilt.

The City marked 67 Ash trees for removal in 2024 and, in turn, 62 were replanted with a variety of resilient species. Two patches (0.09 hectares) of phragmites were retreated at Phyllis Rawlinson Park, using funds (\$2000) from the Invasive Species Centre's Invasive Species Action Fund. As part of the Community Stewardship Program, the City hosted two in-person invasive species management events and, with community volunteers, removed 52 bags of invasive plants. Staff provided the community with EAB and invasive species information through the City's website, social media, community stewardship and other public events.

### **Wildlife**

A healthy and diverse wildlife population is a marker of overall environmental health. Richmond Hill is demonstrating leadership and innovation in continuing to protect wildlife as the city grows.

In May 2024, Council endorsed mandatory Bird-Safe Design Standards that require all new buildings, including future City facilities, to have bird-safe window treatments in strategic locations, helping birds to see the glass and avoid flying into it. Also in May, the City partnered with Richmond Hill Public Library on a family-oriented educational event celebrating birds and their important role in a healthy environment.

Staff installed additional street signs to alert drivers of wildlife crossing and added more streets to the rolling curb project to facilitate turtle crossing. Wildlife connectivity was prioritized as part of the Richmond Hill DDO Pedestrian Bridge conceptual design. The preferred design solution uses pillars to aid wildlife movement between the north/south portions of DDO park.

## Page 8

Richmond Hill began monitoring its instream beaver fencing at Lake Wilcox and bafflers at Phyllis Rawlinson Park both unique approaches to wildlife enhancement. In 2024, the City hosted 5 wildlife-related webinars and continued general wildlife communications (e.g. to discourage wildlife feeding).

### Local Food and Pollinators

Increasing opportunities to grow and access local food, along with protecting pollinating insects and birds, has benefits across the environmental, social, and economic dimensions of our community. Highlights from 2024 include:

- joining the York Region Food Policy Council and participating in York Region Food Network's community garden working group;
- adding two new food-producing collective gardens such as the Green Hills Garden and McConaghy Community Garden under the City's Community Garden program;
- converting a 30 square metres ornamental garden at Patterson Park into a pollinator garden;
- renewing commitments to protect pollinators under the Pollinator Partnership (Bee City designation) and Mayor's Monarch Pledge (elevated to "Leadership Circle" status);
- providing educational webinars and selling subsidized native plant kits to residents through the Healthy Yards Program; and,
- promoting residential stewardship through the Richmond Hill Blooms Program, which was supported by \$5,000 in funding from Miller Waste, and which featured a new "This Garden Supports Pollinators" sticker for RH Blooms lawn signs.

### Waste

Richmond Hill has long been a leader in waste management and is taking important steps at the municipal level to support a Circular Economy that reduces landfill waste, curbs pollution, and prevents greenhouse gas emissions.

In 2024, staff continued to raise awareness about single-use plastics (SUP) by providing public education and Richmond Hill tap water at City facilities (using new water bottle filling stations) and events (using the popular "Fill It Up" trailer, which served over 85,000 visitors at 38 events). Staff are also increasingly borrowing the Waste team's "dish library" to avoid SUP at smaller events. Other highlights include:

- recruiting over 10,500 participants – residents, community groups, schools, businesses, staff and members of Council for the City's Clean Up, Green Up Weeks initiative. Together, volunteers cleaned 130 streets and pathways and 110 parks and open spaces;
- engaging over 1,000 residents at three in-person events at new multi-residential buildings and two re-education events at buildings with lower waste diversion rates;
- collecting approximately 2,200 kg (4850 lbs.) of batteries from battery recycling stations at City facilities – a 30% increase from 2023; and,



## Page 9

- collaborating with York Region on the Share Reuse Repair Hub, a community-based virtual platform to educate and engage residents on advancing the circular economy by sharing, reusing, and repairing items.

### Communicating the Environment Strategy

In 2024, the City continued to provide environmental education and outreach to the community by:

- creating and sharing content on *Greening the Hill* and corporate social media accounts (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram) and webpages to promote the City's environmental achievements, current programs, and opportunities to participate;
- leading and participating at public events, including Earth Day, World Migratory Bird Day, RH Blooms, and other City, community, and Council-led events;
- developing environmental education materials, communications pieces, and outreach activities for staff and the community;
- participating in environmental liaison meetings and speaking engagements with community groups, local schools and youth to listen to concerns and promote participation in City environmental initiatives; and,
- collaborating with local partners to deliver environmental education – for example, the Teen Community Leaders program with Richmond Hill Public Library.

### Next Steps

Throughout 2025, staff will continue working on applicable Environment Strategy actions, with the biannual steering committee meetings used to share progress, discuss challenges and opportunities, and celebrate successes. Staff will also develop the City's second Environmental Scorecard, as required by the Strategy. This public document will convey trends and achievements in Richmond Hill's environmental performance over the past five years (2020-2024) and is expected to be published in early 2026.

### Financial Implications:

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

### Relationship to Strategic Plan 2024-2027:

The 2024 Environment Strategy Progress Report relates to Pillar 1: Growing a Livable, Sustainable Community. Specifically, it supports Priority 2: Implement environmental sustainability practices in our work in collaboration with the community, including planning for climate change mitigation and adaptation, by providing updates on how staff is collaborating with the community and other partners to improve Richmond Hill's environmental footprint and address climate change.

## **Page 10**

### **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 – 2024 Environment Strategy Progress Tracker
- Attachment 2 – 2024 Environment Strategy Highlight Sheet

## Page 11

### Report Approval Details

Document Title:	SRPBS.25.022 – 2024 Environment Strategy Progress Report.docx
Attachments:	- SRPBS.25.022 Att 1 - 2024 Environment Strategy Progress - AODA.pdf - SRPBS.25.022 Att 2 -2024 Environment Strategy Highlight Sheet - AODA.pdf
Final Approval Date:	Mar 17, 2025

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

**Maria Flores - Mar 17, 2025 - 11:51 AM**

**Gus Galanis - Mar 17, 2025 - 11:53 AM**

**Darlene Joslin - Mar 17, 2025 - 2:51 PM**