

# **The Regional Municipality of York**

Committee of the Whole  
Environmental Services  
May 5, 2022

Report of the Commissioner of Public Works

## **Regional Greening Strategy Refinement and 2021 Achievements**

### **1. Recommendations**

1. Council adopt the refined Regional Greening Strategy
2. The Regional Clerk circulate this report to the Clerks of the local municipalities, Chippewas of Georgina Island First Nation, Environment and Climate Change Canada, Natural Resources Canada, Ontario Ministry of Northern Development, Mines, Natural Resources and Forestry, Ontario Ministry of the Environment, Conservation and Parks, Lake Simcoe Region Conservation Authority and Toronto and Region Conservation Authority

### **2. Summary**

This report seeks adoption of a refined Regional Greening Strategy (Greening Strategy) and presents a refined approach for delivering key priorities over the next 10 years. The refined Greening Strategy is presented in Attachment 1. This report also provides Council with an update on activities and significant Greening Strategy achievements for 2021.

Key Points:

- The Greening Strategy is an evolving program that adapts to deliver on-the-ground action to achieve the Region's natural environment priorities
- First adopted in 2001, and last refined in 2012, the Greening Strategy has supported planting over 1.7 million trees and securing 1,518 hectares of land for conservation
- In 2021, the Greening Strategy resulted in planting of 92,154 trees and shrubs, securing 142 hectares of land for conservation, inspiring and informing residents through 57 events and leveraged \$2.8 million in external funding
- To ensure it meets changing needs of the Region's diverse communities and environmental challenges, the Greening Strategy was identified for a 10-year review and refinement

- Public and stakeholders communicated strong support for the Greening Strategy as well as a desire to take action at the individual and community levels to create a healthy natural environment
- The refined Greening Strategy commits to continuing and expanding core programs, developing new partnerships and piloting new programs to offer residents more opportunities to get involved

### 3. Background

#### Greening Strategy contributes to creating and maintaining sustainable natural environments and communities

Since its adoption in 2001 and refinement in 2012, the Greening Strategy has been used as a tool to implement the York Region Official Plan vision for a Sustainable Natural Environment. Delivery is achieved through partnerships and on-the-ground actions that protect and enhance the natural environment and the Regional Greenlands System. Actions result in the protection and enhancement of natural features including forests, wetlands and grasslands (Figure 1).

**Figure 1**

#### Key Strategies and Plans Deliver on Regional Official Plan Objectives



Green infrastructure, including trees, forests and other natural features, provide an array of environmental and health benefits to residents such as cleaning air and water, providing shade and cooling our communities, reducing stormwater runoff and removing and storing carbon from the atmosphere (Figure 2).

**Figure 2**  
**Benefits of the Natural Environment**



### **Twenty years of successful Greening Strategy implementation demonstrate on-the-ground results**

Delivered through four action areas, Environmental Land Protection and Preservation, Enhancement and Rehabilitation, Stewardship and Education, and Leadership, Innovation and Knowledge, the Greening Strategy has supported planting more than 1.7 million trees and shrubs and securing 1,518 hectares of lands for conservation. Over the past 20 years, a Regional investment of \$19 million has secured \$108 million in conservation lands through land securement partnerships, donations from landowners, and funding secured through grants.

Innovative actions implemented through the Greening Strategy have been recognized through numerous awards including:

- 2021 York Region designation as a Tree City of the World by the Arbour Day Foundation and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
- 2019 Lieutenant Governor's Ontario Heritage Award for Excellence in Conservation
- 2019 Green World Awards (Silver) for Environmental Best Practices

The Greening Strategy remains a key delivery mechanism for achieving Region canopy and woodland cover targets.

## 4. Analysis

### Greening Strategy continues to adapt and deliver through challenging COVID-19 circumstances

In 2021, Greening Strategy programs and implementation partners continued to adapt to challenges posed by COVID-19. Programming evolved to meet deliverables and provide residents with options to meet their needs while aligning with COVID-19 public health measures.

Greening Strategy partners operated by adapting their programming to ensure safe and effective practices, including digital and socially distanced outcomes. These actions resulted in over 92,000 trees and shrubs being planted, including creation of 36 hectares of woodland. Outreach events remained lower than normal with 57 events delivered (Table 1). Additional outcomes included the planting of 3,520 pollinator friendly plants and distribution of 2,170 pollinator friendly seed packets.

**Table 1**  
**Greening Strategy 2021 Achievements**

Action Area	Goal	Target (Minimum)	2021 Achievement
Enhancement and Rehabilitation	Enhance and rehabilitate the natural environment on both public and private lands	Plant 70,000 trees and shrubs	92,154 trees and shrubs planted
Environmental Land Protection and Preservation	Restore linkages and protect core natural areas including forests, wetlands and significant habitat	Increasing area (hectares) of environmental lands secured	142 hectares of environmental land secured
Stewardship and Education	Educate residents about the value of the natural environment and provide opportunities to connect with nature and inspire action	100 outreach events Engage 50,000 residents	57 outreach events Over 50,000 residents engaged
Leadership, Innovation and Knowledge	Share knowledge, demonstrate leadership and be innovative in protecting the natural environment	Host four technical regional forums Present at two science and technology forums	20 forums hosted with agencies and local municipalities 18 presentations at science and technology forums

## **York Region was the 2021 recipient of Susan Wiecek Forestry Education Award**

In February 2022, York Region received the 2021 Susan Wiecek Forestry Education Award. The award, issued by Forests Ontario, is presented to individuals or organizations for outstanding contributions to forestry education in Ontario. In the past six years, over 250,000 residents have been engaged through 1,100 events hosted by York Region. During COVID-19, Discover Your Forest Kits were created reaching over 1,330 residents.

## **With funding support from Infrastructure Canada, the Region acquired 142-hectare property to expand the York Regional Forest**

In 2019, York Region was approved for \$10 million in funding through Infrastructure Canada's Disaster Mitigation and Adaptation Fund (DMAF) to implement a natural infrastructure project. The project will result in over 400,000 trees and shrubs being planted across the Region, including establishing 100 hectares of new woodland by 2027.

In 2021, the Region secured 142 hectares of land with approximately 82 hectares available for tree planting. The Region leveraged DMAF funding towards the purchase of the property. In addition to establishing new woodlands and protecting existing woodlands, the property will be operated as a York Regional Forest tract, increasing access to green space for residents.

## **Greening Strategy identified for a 10-year review and refinement in 2021**

With 2021 marking the 20-year anniversary of the Greening Strategy and 10 years since the last refinement, the Greening Strategy was reviewed to ensure it meets the changing needs of the Region's diverse communities and environmental challenges. The review ensures our Greening Strategy remains consistent with new and updated Corporate documents such as Vision, draft Regional Official Plan and draft Climate Change Action Plan.

Consultation with the public, staff and stakeholders was key to informing the refined Greening Strategy. A public survey was completed in the fall of 2021, with 935 responses received. Stakeholders were consulted multiple times, including a workshop with representatives from 22 organizations such as local municipalities, conservation authorities, school boards and other organizations. Public and stakeholder input provided insights on the importance of the Greening Strategy and identified opportunities to improve delivery of on-the-ground actions.

## **Refined Strategy commits to continued delivery of award-winning programs with opportunities to expand activities through new innovative partnerships**

The Greening Strategy refinement process confirmed that Action Areas and associated programs remain relevant, effective and supported by the public and stakeholders. The refined Greening Strategy retains these Action Areas and looks to expand on the success of existing programs by increasing access and capacity (Attachment 1).

The refined Greening Strategy includes continuing emphasis on tree planting and expanding programming to support restoration and enhancement of other types of natural features including wetlands, prairies, hedgerows, as well as pollinator habitat and invasive species management. The Greening Strategy also demonstrates commitment to ongoing collaboration with the agricultural community and related organizations to promote and deliver programs.

Partnerships will continue to be the primary delivery mechanism for the Greening Strategy, allowing the Region to effectively implement programs and efficiently use available funding. Partnerships leverage expertise and additional funding, which often matches or surpasses the investment made by the Region. Actions in the refined Greening Strategy focus on exploring new partnerships with municipalities, school boards, libraries, businesses and non-profit organizations.

### **Greening Strategy leverages innovative and digital technology to deliver on corporate Vision and Strategic Plan**

The refined Greening Strategy continues to support the Region's vision for a sustainable environment and healthy communities and Official Plan policies including a Sustainable Natural Environment, Complete Communities and Agricultural System. The policy review identified that our Greening Strategy remains aligned with key Regional priorities. The Greening Strategy continues to contribute to the Region's 2051 canopy cover target of 40% and woodland cover target of 25%, demonstrating the Region's commitment to on-the-ground action. These actions are supported through innovative digital approaches, including the development and implementation of a tree planting prioritization tool, to identify priority areas to increase canopy cover, and the use of LiDAR to improve accuracy in canopy cover assessments and improved planning for York Regional Forest trails.

Actions in the refined Greening Strategy are also vital to implementation of the draft York Region Climate Change Action Plan, aiding in achieving outcomes under the four priority action areas. Greening Strategy actions, including tree planting and natural feature enhancement, provide numerous benefits that support climate change mitigation including carbon sequestration, regulating climate, improving air quality and enhancing water storage. These actions support creating more resilient communities, that can adapt to and manage the impacts of climate change.

### **Public and stakeholder consultation demonstrates strong interest in protecting and improving the natural environment**

Throughout the fall of 2021 and the beginning of 2022, staff completed multiple stakeholder consultations and a public survey to understand changing needs of residents and partners. Through this engagement, strong support for the Greening Strategy and a desire for York Region to continue and expand programs was communicated.

Stakeholders from local municipalities, environmental organizations and conservation authorities provided feedback on the Greening Strategy. Stakeholders emphasized the importance of the Greening Strategy in achieving on-the-ground actions, as well as delivery

of climate change initiatives. Stakeholder identified the key role the Greening Strategy plays in creating beneficial networks that support partners in implementing more on-the-ground actions.

The public survey gauged current levels of understanding and awareness of the Greening Strategy, perceived importance of the natural environment, and feedback on the Region's role in protecting and restoring the natural environment. Respondents overwhelmingly believe York Region should invest in protecting and enhancing the natural environment with 96% of respondents indicating this activity is very important.

The survey also showed a high level of interest from respondents in participating in a variety of programs offered through the Greening Strategy, including tree planting and educational events. All existing action areas continue to be valued by respondents with a strong desire to see more tree planting, opportunities to learn about and experience the natural environment, and securing land for conservation.

Areas cited as new opportunities for the Greening Strategy included better promotion of the Greening Strategy and programs, native tree and plant sales, fruit tree planting initiatives, and restoration of a variety of habitat types.

### **Agricultural community consulted to identify partnership opportunities**

Agricultural land in York Region plays a significant role in protecting and restoring environmental features, functions and corridors. A workshop was held in early 2022 with the agricultural community to discuss the role agriculture lands play in meeting Greening Strategy objectives and opportunities to collaborate on initiatives in the future.

Key outcomes from this meeting include:

- Recognizing the role of agriculture lands in protecting natural heritage features, creating linkages between natural areas, providing habitat for wildlife and helping to mitigate climate change
- Collaborating to promote program and funding opportunities to farmers for natural feature protection and enhancement
- Partner with agriculture organizations to recognize the important role agricultural lands play through existing natural environment programming and events

The Region is committed to ongoing dialogue and collaboration with the agriculture community on Greening Strategy initiatives.

### **Region will pilot programs that give residents more options to get involved**

Residents communicated a desire for more opportunities to participate in Greening Strategy programming. The refined Greening Strategy proposes a series of actions to support increased awareness of the Strategy and opportunities to get involved. Pilot programs to increase involvement include a Region-wide native tree and plant sale, exploring

opportunities to support and promote fruit trees and expanding educational opportunities to experience the natural environment.

## 5. Financial

Through partnerships, the Greening Strategy leverages in-kind resources and external funding for each action area. In 2021, \$1,940,000 was approved in the operating budget for the Greening Strategy, including \$795,500 for environmental land purchases (Table 2). The remaining \$1,144,500 supports operating programs and partnerships including large scale reforestation, backyard tree planting, outdoor education, and land securement agreements. In 2021, program partners leveraged an additional \$433,000 in funding for program delivery and the Region leveraged \$2.4 million in funding for land securement and urban tree planting from Infrastructure Canada’s Disaster Mitigation and Adaptation Fund. Over the past 20 years, a Regional investment of \$19 million has secured \$108 million in conservation lands through leveraging additional funding and land donations.

**Table 2**  
**Greening Strategy 2021 Operating Budget Overview**

Program	2021 Expenditures*	2022 Budget
Environmental Land Purchases	\$795,500	\$806,000
Greening Strategy Implementation	\$1,144,500	\$1,309,000
<b>Total Operating Budget</b>	<b>\$1,940,000</b>	<b>\$2,115,000</b>

\*actual 2021 expenditures

To implement the refined Greening Strategy and deliver on residents’ desire for more opportunities to contribute to the natural environment, an annual operating budget increase of \$50,000 per year over four years is required. This additional funding will be requested through the Region’s multi-year budget process. Staff will continue to seek opportunities to leverage external funding to support Greening Strategy delivery.

Land prices continue to increase throughout the Region limiting our ability to secure conservation lands within existing budgets. The Region is experiencing an increased demand for public green space. Staff will explore funding opportunities to address market pressures and increasing demand and bring forward requests for additional funding for conservation land securement through the multi-year budget process.



## 6. Local Impact

Through Greening Strategy programs, local municipalities and residents take action to protect and enhance the Region's natural environment. Local municipalities and non-government organizations have benefited directly from the Greening Strategy through on-the-ground actions or direct support for their programs. The refined Greening Strategy ensures that actions and programs remain relevant and beneficial to Regional and local municipal strategic priorities. Program delivery will continue to provide local municipalities and residents with opportunities to enhance and experience the natural environment.

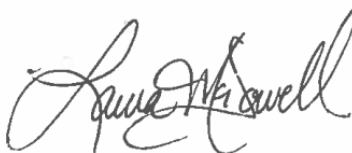
## 7. Conclusion

The Regional Greening Strategy has been an innovative and impactful means to protect and enhance the Region's natural environment over the past 20 years. Through implementation of the Greening Strategy, over 1.7 million trees and shrubs have been planted and 1,518 hectares of conservation lands secured. Through this refinement process, Region residents have re-affirmed the critical role the Greening Strategy plays in protecting the natural environment and creating healthy, livable communities. The refined Greening Strategy positions York Region as leader in developing and implementing innovative and collaborative natural environment programs that deliver measure results.

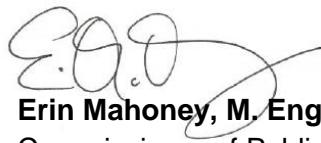
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For more information on this report, please contact Laura McDowell, General Manager Interim Transition, Environmental, Public Works at 1-877-464-9675 ext. 75077. Accessible formats or communication supports are available upon request.

Recommended by:



**Laura McDowell, P. Eng.**  
General Manager, Interim Transition - Environmental



**Erin Mahoney, M. Eng.**  
Commissioner of Public Works



Approved for Submission:

**Bruce Macgregor**  
Chief Administrative Officer

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Attachments (1)  
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