



Report of the Commissioner of Public Works

2023 Regional Greening Strategy Achievements

1. Recommendation

The Regional Clerk circulate this report to the Clerks of local municipalities, Chippewas of Georgina Island First Nation, Environment and Climate Change Canada, Natural Resources Canada, Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry, Ontario Ministry of the Environment, Conservation and Parks, Lake Simcoe Region Conservation Authority, and Toronto and Region Conservation Authority.

2. Purpose

This report updates Council on activities and significant Greening Strategy Achievements for 2023.

Key Points:

- In 2023, the Greening Strategy resulted in planting 116,175 trees and shrubs, inspiring residents through 133 events and leveraging over \$2 million in external funding
- Planting through the Greening Strategy supports progress on key Disaster Mitigation and Adaptation Fund (DMAF) deliverables, including planting 30,687 trees and shrubs in urban areas and planting 30,517 seedlings on land secured through DMAF
- The Greening Strategy celebrated the planting of its two millionth tree in collaboration with Community and Health Services, The Chippewas of Georgina Island and numerous Greening Strategy partners
- Updated rules for managing dogs in the York Regional Forest are yielding positive results and support from residents

3. Background

Greening Strategy contributes to creating healthy communities and a strong natural environment

The Regional Greening Strategy provides forward facing action to support the Region’s priorities for a Sustainable Environment, supporting the Region’s Climate Change Action Plan and driving environmental stewardship. The Strategy delivers results through partnerships and on the ground action protecting and enhancing the natural environment including trees and forests, pollinators, streams and wetlands, grasslands and other essential habitats.

Green Infrastructure, including trees, forests, and other natural features, supports an array of environmental and health benefits to residents while supporting York Region’s Vision (Figure 1).

Figure 1
Benefits of the Natural Environment



Trees and forests provide a multitude of environmental, health and economic benefits that make local communities more sustainable and help the Region mitigate and adapt to climate change. In recognition of the vital role that trees and forests play, Council approved the York Region Forest Management Plan on [November 17, 2016](#). The Plan expands on the Greening Strategy and includes a goal to increase tree canopy cover to 40% by 2051. Canopy cover was last reported to Council through the State of the Forest report on [May 13, 2021](#) as 33.4%. Canopy cover will be re-assessed in 2025 and reported to Council through the State of the Forest report in 2026.

York Regional Forest rules updated in 2022 to require dogs be on-leash at all times, except in otherwise designated areas

During development of “It’s in Our Nature: Management Plan for the York Regional Forest 2019 – 2038”, it was recognized that dog walking, in particular off-leash, was increasingly creating challenges for visitors as well as staff responsible for management of the Forest. In the 2017 forest use survey, 55% of all respondents supported having dogs on-leash unless in a designated off-leash area. It was also clear that many others valued the opportunity to walk their dogs off-leash in the Forest.

In 2022, York Regional Forest rules were updated to require dogs be on-leash at all times, except in otherwise designated areas, which included allowing dogs off-leash in two forest tracts. Since the rule change took effect in May 2022, monitoring of impacts has been on-going and includes user experience surveys, on site assessments of use, ecological monitoring, and enforcement in collaboration with local municipal partners.

4. Analysis

Greening Strategy demonstrates strong results in four key action areas in 2023

The Greening Strategy delivers actions through four key action areas:

1. Environmental Land Protection and Preservation
2. Enhancement and Rehabilitation
3. Community Stewardship and Education
4. Innovation and Knowledge

In 2023, Greening Strategy achievements exceeded targets in several action areas, contributing to a healthy and sustainable York Region (key highlights summarized in Table 1). Appendix 1 presents a more detailed summary of 2023 Greening Strategy achievements.

Table 1
Greening Strategy 2023 Achievements

Action Area	Goal	Target (Minimum)	2023 Achievement	
Enhancement and Rehabilitation	Enhance and rehabilitate the natural environment on public and private lands	Plant 70,000 trees and shrubs	116,175 trees and shrubs planted	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Environmental Land Protection and Preservation	Protect and enhance natural areas and create and strengthen connections and corridors	Increasing area (hectares) of environmental lands secured	Advanced negotiations and approvals for two properties totalling 145 hectares	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Community Stewardship and Education	Inspire stewardship and action through education and facilitating connections with nature	100 outreach events 10,000 residents participate in programs	133 outreach events 10,701 program participants	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Innovation and Knowledge	Seek and transfer knowledge and demonstrate leadership and innovation in the protection and promotion of the natural environment	Lead or present at 15 professional learning events	Lead or presented at 30 professional learning events	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>

In 2023, Council approved the acquisition of two parcels to add to the York Regional Forest. These acquisitions were completed in early 2024 and will be reported to Council as part of the 2024 Greening Strategy achievements.

York Region celebrates planting of two millionth tree since inception of the Greening Strategy

In September 2023, during National Forest Week, senior leadership, staff and partners participated in the ceremonial planting of the two millionth Greening Strategy tree. The tree was planted at Vaughan Maple Health Centre in collaboration with Community and Health Services, beside the one millionth tree, planted in 2013. The Region achieved this milestone in fewer years than the one millionth tree, demonstrating our commitment to increasing the number of trees planted annually. This tree demonstrates the leadership role York Region has taken in ensuring a sustainable and healthy community for all York Region residents.

Planting 116,175 trees and shrubs in 2023, York Region delivered its second largest number of plantings in a single year

Robust results in 2023 saw 116,175 trees and shrubs planted through Greening Strategy programs and initiatives, creating over 51 hectares of new woodlands. New trees were planted through diverse programs that supported schools, private residents, municipal parks, conservation areas, Regional streets and the York Regional Forest. Trees planted through the Greening Strategy support progress towards the Region’s canopy and woodland cover targets.

With funding support from Infrastructure Canada, the Region is supporting the planting of trees in urban and rural communities

In 2019, York Region was awarded \$10 million in funding through Infrastructure Canada’s Disaster Mitigation and Adaptation Fund (DMAF) to implement a \$25 million natural infrastructure project over eight years. The project will result in over 400,000 trees and shrubs being planted across the Region, including establishing 100 hectares of new woodland by 2028. This project will increase resilience to climate change through carbon removal and storage and mitigate local impacts including extreme heat and flood events. The Region was awarded a further \$48 million for the York Durham Sanitary Sewer Forcemain Twinning and \$8.2 million for the Aurora Sewage Pumping Station through DMAF in 2019.

In 2023, the Region planted 30,687 trees and shrubs in urban areas and 30,517 seedlings to establish new woodlands through the DMAF natural infrastructure project. Staff anticipate meeting project deliverables as planned by March 2028.

Emerging invasive species concerning for York Region’s trees and woodlands

Ontario has more invasive species than any other province or territory in Canada. After an unprecedented outbreak of spongy moth, York Region’s trees and woodlands are now being threatened by emerging invasive species such as hemlock woolly adelgid, oak wilt and spotted lanternfly.

Figure 2

Emerging Invasive Species of Concern



Hemlock woolly adelgid

Oak wilt

Spotted lanternfly

Hemlock woolly adelgid is a tiny aphid-like insect native to Japan that feeds on and kills native eastern hemlock trees. This species was most recently discovered in Grafton and Hamilton, Ontario. Oak wilt is a fungal pathogen that infects and kills our native oak trees. Oak wilt was confirmed for the first time in Ontario this past summer in the City of Niagara Falls and the Township of Springwater. Spotted lanternfly, a very colourful flying insect originally from Asia, will feed on more than 100 species of trees and plants and is a direct threat to grape, fruit tree and forestry industries. Presently, spotted lanternfly has not been confirmed in Ontario, however infestations have been confirmed in New York State near the Canadian border. More information on these invasive species can be found on the [Invasive Species Centre](#) website.

Staff are preparing threat assessments for these emerging species to understand potential impacts and mitigation options to help protect Regional assets while promoting increased awareness to residents and visitors of the York Regional Forest in hopes early detection will allow for control and potential eradication.

York Region remains a leader in invasive species management, with Region efforts recognized in multiple areas of the Province's 2022 Invasive Species Progress Report. In late 2023, the Province announced its intention to renew the Ontario Invasive Species Strategic Plan (2012). Staff submitted a response showing support for continued action on invasive species, increased funding for municipalities and urged the Province to focus on prevention, early detection and coordinated approaches among all levels of government and key stakeholders.

Updated rules for dog walking in the York Regional Forest providing a positive visitor experience for all forest users

After 18 months of implementation, including monitoring and user experience surveys, the updated rules for managing dogs in York Regional Forests are demonstrating positive results and support from all forest users. The [updated rules](#) in the "It's in Our Nature: Management Plan for the York Regional Forest 2019 – 2038 provide opportunities for visitors, specifically dog walkers, to experience the Forest with their dogs on or off-leash. A 2023 survey of forest users showed an average overall experience rating of 4.6 out of 5, with 97% of respondents stating they were likely to return to the forest.

The two off-leash tracts, Bendor and Graves and Davis Drive, have been very popular with off-leash dog walkers and remain within capacity to support the number of users visiting the tracts. In on-leash tracts, compliance with the rule has generally been good with monitoring indicating an 85% compliance rate in 2023. The Region continues to work collaboratively with our local municipal by-law partners to educate users and enforce the rules.

5. Financial Considerations

Greening Strategy leverages partner support and additional funds to deliver a strong year of programs

In 2023, \$3,064,773 was spent on Greening Strategy programs, including \$2,418,773 to support large-scale reforestation, backyard tree planting, outdoor education, and contribution to land securement reserve. The remaining \$646,000 came from the Greenlands Property Securement Reserve to support DMAF urban tree planting and environmental land purchases (Table 2).

Table 2
Greening Strategy 2023 Actuals and 2024 Budget

Program	2023 Actuals (\$)	2024 Budget (\$)
DMAF Urban Tree Planting and Environmental Land Purchases (Capital)	646,000	867,000
Greening Strategy (Operating)	2,418,773	2,423,791
Total Budget	3,064,773	3,290,791

The \$226,018 increase between 2023 actuals and 2024 budget is largely due to increased tree planting associated with the DMAF natural infrastructure project. Through partnerships, the Greening Strategy leverages in-kind resources and external funding for each action area. In 2023, the Region and partners leveraged a total of \$2.75 million in additional funding towards Strategy projects and programming, including \$622,554 in funding from DMAF. The \$622,554 in DMAF funding was received by the Region with the balance of leveraged funding being received directly by partners.

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. Local municipalities and residents remain key stakeholders in the development and implementation of new programs to support a sustainable York Region.

7. Conclusion

The Regional Greening Strategy has been a driving force for sustainability and the natural environment in York Region. With more than 116,000 trees and shrubs planted in 2023, including the two millionth tree planted through the Greening Strategy, significant gains continue to be made towards increasing tree canopy and woodland cover in York Region. This report is a demonstration of the Region’s leadership and the value of the Greening Strategy as a proactive measure to support a healthy sustainable Region.

For more information on this report, please contact Lindsay Milne, Director, Waste Management and Forestry, Operations and Services, Public Works at 1-877-464-9675 ext.75714. Accessible formats or communication supports are available upon request.



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Appendix A - Greening Strategy Achievements Summary

2023 GREENING STRATEGY ACHIEVEMENTS

York Region's Greening Strategy puts into action the Region's commitment to a healthier, more resilient natural environment



ENHANCEMENT AND REHABILITATION

Planting trees, shrubs and pollinator plants, restoring streams and wetlands, and establishing new forests, hedgerows and meadows ensure a sustainable environment for future generations



PLANTED
116,175 TREES AND SHRUBS
EXCEEDED TARGET OF 70,000 PLANTINGS

116,175 trees and shrubs were planted through more than **20 partnerships**:

- 37,818 Grow Your Legacy
- 469 Backyard Trees
- 6,314 Ontario Streams Program
- 2,044 Green Action Partnership Fund
- 61,204 Disaster Mitigation and Adaptation Fund
- 8,326 Other Programs

Plantings occurred on both public and private land in a variety of habitats.



51 HECTARES
OF WOODLAND COVER CREATED IN 2023

TARGETS

WOODLAND COVER		CANOPY COVER	
2021*	2051 Target	2021*	2051 Target
23.6%	25%	33.4%	40%

COMMUNITY STEWARDSHIP AND EDUCATION

Inspiring stewardship and action through education and facilitating connections with nature is one of our strongest tools.



RESIDENTS ENGAGED AT
133 OUTREACH EVENTS

Residents reconnected with nature and learned about the natural environment through a variety of events hosted by York Region and partners. These events were delivered through in-person and digital media.

IN-PERSON LEARNING PROGRAMS

RETURN TO FULL CAPACITY

York Region Forest Walks and events returned to monthly in-person Events for residents to get out in Nature. Programs saw high uptake and enthusiasm as residents returned to the forest to learn



10,701 RESIDENTS PARTICIPATED
IN GREENING STRATEGY SUPPORTED PROGRAMS

ENVIRONMENTAL LAND PROTECTION AND PRESERVATION

A healthy, extensive and connected natural heritage system is essential for biodiversity, and public green spaces are important amenities that provide recreation opportunities and support the physical and mental well-being of residents.

Advanced negotiations and approvals for two properties.

In 2023, York Region received council approval to proceed with two land securement acquisitions, these acquisitions are being finalized and are expected to be secured in 2024



1,517 HECTARES
OF ENVIRONMENTALLY SIGNIFICANT LAND PROTECTED



ESTIMATED 30 MILLION
TREES IN YORK REGION

INNOVATION AND KNOWLEDGE

York Region remains a leader in the protection and promotion of the natural environment through its policies, programs and use of innovative strategies.

Exchanged information, shared accomplishments, and continued innovation at **15 Regional Forums** and **15 technical presentations** throughout the Region.

\$2,750,000 LEVERAGED TOWARDS GREENING STRATEGY PROJECTS

In 2023, the Region and its partners leveraged a total of **\$2.75 million** in additional funding, including \$622,554 in funding from Infrastructure Canada's Disaster Mitigation and Adaptation Fund.

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