

MARCH 2022

ATTACHMENT 1

THE REGIONAL MUNICIPALITY OF YORK GREENING STRATEGY

STEPS TO A HEALTHIER ENVIRONMENT





Family fun in the forest

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Photo: Forest Canopy

THE GREENING STRATEGY: STEPS TO A HEALTHIER ENVIRONMENT

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

Caring for and enhancing all green spaces across York Region -- from backyards to forests and everything in between -- is important to build healthy communities that support residents' physical and mental well-being. Trees and other natural features act as green infrastructure, which has been identified as a critical aspect of creating sustainable and resilient communities by using natural processes and plants to help purify air and water. Leveraging

nature this way is much less costly than building infrastructure for the same purpose.

Healthy green spaces also benefit birds, pollinators, other wildlife in the face of pressures from growth and climate change. Meadows and prairies dotted with wildflowers are especially important for native bees and butterflies. Wetlands are home to many diverse life forms, feeding and sheltering at least one third of all at-risk species across North America. Large areas of woodland are essential to the survival of deep-forest birds like the colourful cerulean warbler, which is a threatened species in Ontario.

First approved by Regional Council in 2001, the Greening Strategy has since been refined to reflect evolving policy direction as well as emerging priorities. This newest refinement continues to focus on protecting and preserving important green spaces, enhancing and rehabilitating natural features throughout the Region, inspiring and educating the community, and embracing innovation while sharing knowledge.

As well as continuing programs to increase the tree cover in the Region, the refined Strategy gives more thought to how meadows, prairie, wetlands, hedgerows, other rural lands and naturalized urban areas can contribute to ecosystem and community health.

Another important strand in this update is broader community involvement. This includes acknowledging and embracing the heritage of the Indigenous peoples who were the first to live here, and a commitment to engage with First Nations and Indigenous communities through involvement in implementation of the Strategy. It also means committing to engage often and meaningfully with the Region's agricultural community, which has long had an important stewardship role. Finally, it means recognizing that public green spaces should be accessible to everyone in the Region and should feel welcoming to all who want to enjoy them.

BENEFITS OF THE NATURAL ENVIRONMENT



Enhanced air
and water
quality



Reduced
flooding risks



Opportunities to
be physically
active in nature



Healthy and
sustainable
communities



Improved mental
health outcomes



A legacy for
future
generations



Climate change
mitigation



Habitat for
wildlife



Photos: Maple Tree Canopy, Outdoor Education, Photo Contest - Pale Green Weevil, Bendor and Graves tall grass prairie



THE FOUNDATIONS OF THE GREENING STRATEGY

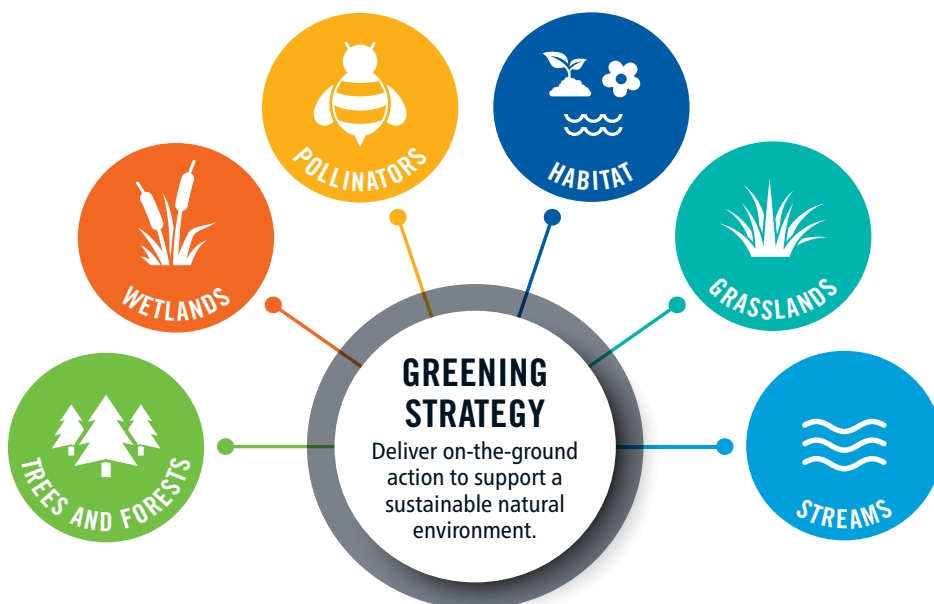
The Greening Strategy enacts policies set out in several key Regional documents, including the Region's Vision and Strategic Plan, the Regional Official Plan, and the draft Climate Change Action Plan. The guidance in those documents focuses the Strategy on supporting healthy, sustainable and connected green spaces. An important focus for the Region is the Greenland System, which includes ecologically important areas like the York Regional Forest. To nurture a wide range of life forms, the Region needs to provide and protect these areas, and also encourage residents and others to provide a wide range of habitats in all settings.

The Greening Strategy is one element of a wide range of

programs and plans across Regional government that contribute to a more sustainable environment, such as the draft Climate Change Action Plan and the Agriculture and Agri-Food Sector Strategy. There are important linkages between the Greening Strategy and other plans, especially the Water and Wastewater Master Plan, which also advocates for greater use of green infrastructure. In addition, the Greening Strategy is connected to the Regional Official Plan and the Transportation Master Plan, both of which envision a Region of more compact growth in which active and eco-friendly transportation options are more widely available, especially by using trails and paths in green spaces.

The Greening Strategy supports the draft Climate Change Action Plan:

- Encouraging and funding the planting of trees and shrubs is the most cost-effective means of capturing carbon across the Region to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Protecting and enhancing wetlands, ponds and grasslands also enables storage of large amounts of carbon.
- In addition, these natural assets and areas help prevent floods by absorbing heavy rain and snowmelt, an increasingly important role as climate change triggers more extreme weather.
- Encouraging greater use of green infrastructure by government, businesses and homeowners reduces the need for built infrastructure and the energy it uses.
- Promoting plantings, especially of native species, on as many different types of land as possible nurtures native pollinators, birds and other wildlife as climate change makes them more vulnerable to threats.



THE GREENING STRATEGY DEPENDS ON EVERYONE GETTING INVOLVED

More than ever, achieving the goals of the Greening Strategy will depend on working together. Providing more habitat in more settings, including private land, helps biodiversity. Biodiversity is critical because the more different life forms that an ecosystem includes, the more resiliency that ecosystem has against pressures from climate change, urbanization and invasive species.

This means that everyone can play a role -- gardeners, businesses, farmers, home builders, schoolkids and community organizations, as well as municipal and other levels of government. While protected areas within the Greenland Systems are critical, a rich and diverse natural environment also depends on leveraging the land around homes, businesses, schools and other institutions, as well as agricultural land that is not actively planted with crops. Biodivcanada, Canada's biodiversity clearing house, notes that backyard and neighbourhood habitats are crucial in holding together an increasingly fragmented natural landscape.

The Region will also continue to work with partner organizations to maximize impacts. By partnering, the Region is able to leverage more funding for Greening Strategy goals -- in some cases, resulting in five times the Region's own investment. This can include the partner's own funding as well as funds from other levels of government, such as Environment Canada's Ecological Gifts program for land securement

Photo: Spring Forest Festival tree planting

Farming plays a key stewardship role

The agriculture industry is a vital and thriving part of York Region's economy, and the Region is home to some of the most productive farmland in Ontario. Farmers have long been at the forefront of protecting land, air and water and continue to have a strong stewardship role in York Region. This is reflected in the Region's Vision, which notes that the agricultural sector contributes to natural habitat and acts as a carbon sink.

In addition to producing food, local farmlands help to mitigate climate change and create important habitat linkages allowing our wildlife to travel between forests and fields. In addition to fields, farmlands also often contain key natural heritage features such as wetlands, streams, woodlands and trees that are protected and cared for by farmers.

While the Region has developed an Agriculture and Agri-Food Sector Strategy to support the industry, the Greening Strategy includes actions to partner with farmers to support this stewardship and recognize the role of farmlands in meeting Greening Strategy goals.



‘Amazing program’ delivered through LEAF partnership

York Region supports a program for planting trees on homeowner’s yards that’s delivered by a non-profit known as LEAF (Local Enhancement and Appreciation of Forests). The program offers full service and do-it-yourself options for planting. As a homeowner from Newmarket put it: “A big, beautiful tree that supports our local wildlife, cools my porch, and beautifies my home... delivered to my door with mulch! What more could you ask for? This is an amazing program with prices that can’t be beat and unique trees that can be hard to source. Thanks to the Town of Newmarket and York Region for subsidizing and prioritizing our urban canopy cover. Our native trees are an important part of solving our climate and biodiversity crisis.”

Naturalizing one York Region property adds 18,000 trees

York Region always looks at opportunities to naturalize its own properties. An example is the water resource recovery facility on Doane Road between Centre Street and the York-Durham Line. Through partnerships with the Lake Simcoe Region Conservation Authority and community plantings, more than 18,000 tree seedlings were planted on the site between 2015 and 2018.



Bill Fisch Forest Stewardship and Education Centre certified as ‘living building’

In 2018 the unique and inspiring Bill Fisch Forest Stewardship and Education Centre in the York Regional Forest became the first building in Canada and only the twenty-first in the world to be certified under the Living Building Challenge. The certification assesses a building’s performance from the perspectives of site, water, energy, health, materials, equity and beauty. The building previously received Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED®) Platinum certification. Its innovative features include all-wood construction using Forest Stewardship Council certified or recycled wood; solar panels, LEDs, heat pumps, and triple-glazed windows that allow the building to generate more energy than it uses; and water supply from rain and snow melt.

Photos: Bill Fisch Forest Stewardship and Education Centre, Bendor and Graves Reforestation



ACHIEVEMENTS

'Discover Your Forest' kits met the challenge of lockdowns

When in-person events had to be put on hold during the COVID-19 pandemic, staff responded by creating a quarterly Discover Your Forest Kit. These kits included the Everyday Guide to the York Regional Forest and self-guided activities developed by partners like Forests Ontario, LEAF, the Toronto and Region Conservation Authority and the Lake Simcoe Region Conservation Authority. In total, more than 1,000 kits were distributed, reaching over 3,000 participants.

Grow Your Legacy: before and after

The Grow Your Legacy Program supports large-scale tree-planting projects to create or expand woodlands on private and public lands. This program is implemented through partnerships with the two conservation authorities active in York Region, Toronto and Region for the Lake Ontario watershed and Lake Simcoe Region for the Lake Simcoe/Lake Huron watershed. They work directly with landowners to plan and carry out tree planting. The program is funded by the Region, landowner and other sources.

Photo: Monarch butterfly on a cup plant at the Bendor and Graves prairie

New property will grow the Forest and trail system

In 2021, York Region secured a 142-hectare (350-acre) property in the Town of East Gwillimbury to expand the York Regional Forest. Plans included increasing woodland cover through tree planting on 82 hectares and promoting outdoor recreation by adding trails.



ACHIEVEMENTS SINCE THE INCEPTION OF THE GREENING STRATEGY



1,700,000 +
trees and shrubs planted



149,000+
Participants in Region and partner-led Greening Strategy Programs



1,518 Hectares
(almost 3,800 acres)
Lands secured by York Region and partners



\$108,000,000
Value of lands secured for conservation



York Region was recognized in 2021 as a Tree City of the World by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations and The Arbour Day Foundation

REFINED GREENING STRATEGY RESPONDS TO RESIDENTS' INPUT

To help shape the refined Greening Strategy, a public survey was carried out in the fall of 2021. The goals included learning how much residents know about the Greening Strategy, asking for their opinions on existing programs and finding out what they view as important in the next 10 years.

The survey found that:

- 96% of respondents believe it is very important for York Region to invest in protecting and enhancing the natural environment
- More than half of respondents are interested in taking part in Greening Strategy programs
- Key areas in which the Region should take action through the Strategy are:
 - › Land Protection and Preservation: Securing land to protect existing natural features
 - › Enhancement and Rehabilitation: Naturalizing public lands
 - › Stewardship and education: Providing opportunities for residents and others to experience nature
 - › Leadership, Innovation and Knowledge: Working with local municipalities and organizations to develop coordinated programs and efforts
 - › While many respondents were familiar with specific programs, only 68% had heard of the Greening Strategy.

The results of the survey show the Region is on the right track and residents are very interested in getting involved. As a result, the major goals of the Greening Strategy remain the same, and this refinement provides more ways for residents to take part, commits to growing partnerships, aims to protect species at risk and pollinators throughout the landscape, and expands programs to enhance and rehabilitate habitats like wetlands. In addition, the Region will commit to raising awareness of the Greening Strategy and connecting residents to the programs that matter most to them.



Photos: Discover your forest kit - Social media post, L.E.A.F. National Tree Day Marita Park 2014, Enjoying time together in the forest. YR forest photo contest

GREENING STRATEGY ACTION AREAS

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. Connecting green spaces provides corridors that link larger areas and make it easier for trees and plants to thrive and for birds and other wildlife to find food and shelter.

Large protected natural areas help the Region mitigate and adapt to the impacts of climate change including reducing the risk of flooding, protecting source water, and facilitating species migration.

Goal: Protect and enhance natural areas and create and strengthen connections and corridors

Projects and Programs

- Partnerships to protect land for conservation
- Secure land to expand the York Regional Forest for public use

Actions

- Review and refine criteria for evaluating securement opportunities
- Review and refine agreements with current and new partners
- Seek opportunities to expand York Regional Forest through land securement



Community stewardship and education

York Region residents are clearly interested in how they can make the environment healthier and more sustainable. This includes understanding the value of the natural environment, how to plant and care for natural elements, and encouraging residents to take advantage of the mental and physical health benefits of green spaces.

Goal: Inspire stewardship and action through education and facilitating connections with nature

Projects and Programs

- Natures Classroom Program
- Events in the York Regional Forest
- In School Education Programs (Treebee and Envirothon)
- Promoting the benefits of trees to residents

Actions

- Refine Nature's Classroom Program based on results of Visitor Experience Plan for the York Regional Forest
- Explore opportunities to promote awareness of natural environment programs specific to agricultural properties
- Recognize role of agricultural lands in a healthy natural environment in educational programming
- Increase awareness and promote Greening Strategy, programs, and achievements
- Partner with new educational partners, such as libraries and local municipalities, to enhance community learning opportunities
- Develop Discover your Forest welcome kit for forest newcomers

Photo: Grow Your Legacy photo shoot

GREENING STRATEGY ACTION AREAS

Enhancement and Rehabilitation

Creating and improving natural features is critical to the health of our communities. Planting trees, shrubs and pollinator plants, restoring streams and wetlands, and establishing new forests, hedgerows and meadows ensure a sustainable environment for future generations. Enhancing the natural environment relies on partnerships with residents, schools, businesses, and others to strengthen the entire ecosystem across the Region. From a backyard tree or a school pollinator garden to a large forest, the benefits provided increase the quality of life for everyone in the Region.

Goal: Enhance and rehabilitate the natural environment on public and private lands.

Projects and Programs

- Grow Your Legacy Large Scale Tree Planting Program
- Backyard Tree Planting Program
- Community tree planting to naturalize public land
- Stream and Wetland Rehabilitation Program
- Schoolground Greening Program
- York Region Property Naturalization
- Greening Action Partnership Fund
- Supporting and promoting pollinator habitat

Actions

- Review and refine Grow Your Legacy partnership agreements and program criteria to increase planting
- Implement micro-grant funding program for community groups, schools, and organizations for natural environment enhancement and restoration projects
- Partner with local municipalities to refine Backyard Tree Planting Program and target priority areas
- Pilot a planting program partnership targeting Industrial, Commercial and Institutional lands
- Review and refine agreements for schoolground planting partnerships
- Work with existing conservation partners and agriculture communities to improve access to funding programs for farmlands
- Pilot a Region-wide native tree, shrub, and plant sale
- Review and refine stream, wetland and riparian rehabilitation program and explore opportunities to expand
- Explore new and innovative partnerships to plant trees, shrubs, and pollinator plants, including fruit trees



Photos: Sustainable timber harvest, Ontario Turtle Conservation Centre staff representative holding a snapping turtle - 2017 Spring Forest Festival - YR forest photo contest, Water in a low area on a cold winter day - YR forest photo contest, 2016 Envirothon

GREENING STRATEGY ACTION AREAS



Photos: Picking the best trees for street tree planting, 2016 Field Tour–street tree and horticulture, Structural soil installation on Donald Cousens Parkway Fall 2009, Accessible Trail in Hollidge Tract Ribbon cutting for opening of YRF first Accessible Trail–September 20, 2010

Innovation and knowledge

York Region continues to demonstrate leadership in the protection and promotion of the natural environment through its policies, programs and use of leading-edge approaches. Through inclusive forums and technical working groups, the Greening Strategy provides opportunities for York Region, its partners, and neighbouring Regions to share successes and challenges and learn from one another.

Goal: Seek and transfer knowledge and demonstrate leadership and innovation in the protection and promotion of the natural environment.

Projects and Programs

- Hosting forums and working groups to support Greening Strategy Objectives
- Working with public health to share knowledge and partnership opportunities
- Conducting forest studies in partnership with local municipalities
- Sharing knowledge through forums and workshops

Actions

- Work with partners to share best practices and consistent messaging to improve resident knowledge relating to the natural environment such as climate change, invasive species and other topics of interest
- Partner with research and education institutions to support innovation and build a body of knowledge in Natural Heritage and Forestry
- Explore opportunities to partner with First Nations, including incorporating traditional ecological knowledge into Greening Strategy Programs
- Expand and refine existing forum to encourage collaboration and knowledge sharing among local municipal environmental advisory committees
- Explore options to assess and report on biodiversity across the Region

ACTING ON THE GREENING STRATEGY

This refinement continues valuable activities and programs that have contributed to protection of more natural features in the Region, a healthier and larger tree cover, enhancement of other habitat types like prairie, and education and outreach to show more people the benefits of a closer connection to nature. In response to what residents would like to see, as well as emerging science, it expands on programs and efforts to encourage biodiversity, use land more sustainably, and prevent greenhouse gases from entering the environment.

These will be very important goals over the next 10 years, as the Region grows and urbanizes and the need to mitigate climate change impacts becomes more pressing. Healthier and more diverse natural features will also help residents, as well as native wildlife, better manage climate change impacts by reducing flood risks, providing summer cooling and winter shelter, and making York Region a more green and welcoming place.

With this refinement, the Region invites residents, businesses and others to become involved. To stay up to date on Greening Strategy programs and activities at york.ca/yrf

Photos: YR forest photo contest, Street Tree Survey curbox sign-October 2020, Spring Forest Festival, YR forest photo contest - editors choice





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york.ca/forestry