

Committee of the Whole (Working Session) Report

DATE: Wednesday, September 15, 2021

WARD(S): ALL

TITLE: HORTICULTURE OPERATION'S BEAUTIFICATION STRATEGY 2.0

FROM:

Zoran Postic, Deputy City Manager, Public Works

ACTION: DECISION

Purpose

To seek Council endorsement of the Horticulture Operation's Beautification Strategy 2.0 highlighting Council's commitment to citizens to provide beautification across the City that is coherent, efficient, and sustainable in support of the 2018-2022 Term of Council Service Excellence Strategic Plan and beyond.

Report Highlights

- The original beautification strategy Council endorsed in 2016, has met its objective, and operations have advanced through several improvement initiatives, including:
 - Complete inventory mapping,
 - Implementation of "smart" standardized planters and hanging baskets, with a cost avoidance of \$110,000 annually; and
 - Implementation of a sponsorship program, that created an additional revenue stream of \$75,000.
- The renewed beautification strategy addresses citizen expectations and will deliver:
 - Increased maintenance levels,
 - Clarity on horticulture display classifications, and
 - A standard of work for the Horticulture program.
- The renewed strategy will be implemented in a phased approach; status updates will be provided to Council annually, each spring.
- This renewed strategy will require an \$822,500 investment cash flowed over the next three (3) years
- A municipal scan comparing Vaughan's service levels to other comparable municipalities shows that Vaughan is providing a lower level of service.

Recommendations

1. That Council endorse the renewed Beautification 2.0 Strategy as substantially presented in this report and Attachment 1; and
2. That the required operational budget for the recommendation be considered in future budget cycles.

Background

The 2016 Beautification Strategy set out two main objectives, which have been fulfilled by horticulture operations.

The first objective was to outline a general strategy for the beautification of the City of Vaughan. The strategy addressed shortcomings and outlined a general beautification framework that features four (4) classifications (Basic, Standard, Enhanced and Premium); these classifications are associated with a specific composition of plant materials, as well as a specific level of service.

The second objective was surrounding beautification plans for Canada's 150th Anniversary celebration. There was six (6) proposed sites that have received enhanced beautification. Staff have outlined efforts with service groups and other City of Vaughan departments to foster community ownership of these 150th Anniversary sites.

Significant improvements have been made to streamline service delivery, sustain service levels, and provide communities with dedicated gardeners.

A major inventory initiative, consisting of 2,200 horticulture displays have been collected and catalogued. This inventory has provided an opportunity to create dedicated maintenance zones that balanced resources across the City. This resulted in an equal distribution of horticulture resources and staff, and a 43% reduction in assets per zones which provided a foundation in moving towards a more proactive model. Dedicated maintenance zones foster a sense of ownership amongst staff and provides communities with dedicated gardeners that are familiar with the sites and cultural needs of the areas.

The implementation of reservoir planters in 2020 provides an on-going cost benefit of \$110,000 annually, by cutting watering efforts in half.

In 2020, reservoir planters were adopted and paired with 750 reservoir hanging baskets to reduce total watering efforts by 50%. This initiative is expected to realize perpetual cost avoidance of \$110,000 annually. Beyond operational benefits, these planters also provide standardization and improve plant health by mitigating against overwatering.

The 2021 launch of the horticulture sponsorship program, Grow with Vaughan, stands to off-set approximately \$75,000 in operational costs annually, while providing businesses with partnership opportunities.

The Municipal Partnership Office (MPO) in collaboration with Parks Forestry Horticulture Operations (PFHO) developed a program to offer support, targeted engagement, and community investment opportunities at a low-cost for local businesses through a horticulture sponsorship program. The program provides the opportunity to build brand awareness in a targeted community, along with positive brand association, by contributing to the quality of life and beautification of the neighborhood's businesses operate. The program also created a revenue stream for horticulture operations to help offset maintenance costs. This funding helps support the growing operations that, historically, had difficulties finding funding. During the first year of implementation, sponsorship, 21 out of a possible 50 sites have been sold, generating over \$38,000 in sponsorships; this has helped offset seasonal labour.

As a result of the success within the first year, the Municipal Partnership Office will continue to collaborate with Parks, Forestry and Horticulture Operations to expand this program to other opportunities to continue to build brand recognition for Vaughan's business community and help offset operational costs.

Transitioning to a perennial based garden has created efficiencies in maintenance efforts along with an annual \$10,000 cost saving, while achieving beautification across the City.

Moving to a more resilient and robust perennial based garden will help sustain costs, reduce maintenance, increase the overall flower inventory, and promote a sustainable operation year over year.

Transitioning from annual flower displays to a perennial base flower bed will show a return on investment of double the plant material after the third (3rd) year through dividing, splitting, budding, and propagating, thus increasing the number of flowers for beautification. Horticulture has been able to achieve a cost avoidance of \$10,000 per year with overwintering planter centre piece materials.

Another benefit was a realization last year, when Covid-19 handcuffed beautification efforts associated with annual plantings. A perennial based garden would relieve constraints in the event of future work disruption or planting failures, minimizing risk, and ensuring beautification year over year.

The advancements realized assist in both quantifying maintenance cost as well as partially offsetting recent growth pressures.

The continuing growth in assets – imminently in the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre, the Hospital Precinct, and various subdivisions entrance features – requires continuing investment in operations to achieve service delivery targets. As horticulture displays are designed and built, horticulture operations can provide robust assessment of

maintenance resource requirements. Moreover, the effort made to advance operational efficiency and finding alternative funding sources have helped to lessen these requirements.

The successes achieved presents an opportune time to review and refresh this strategy to ensure that it continues to align with Terms of Council priorities and the needs of our citizens.

Previous Reports/Authority

2016 – [“Vaughan – A Beautiful Experience”](#)

2020 – [“Horticulture Beds Sponsorship Program”](#)

Analysis and Options

The proposed strategy was developed out of a comprehensive analysis of performance data, citizen call-in data, municipal benchmarking, and public engagement.

Staff have completed a comprehensive analysis with citizen engagement as a fundamental input to the renewed beautification strategy. The review also included a comprehensive review of horticulture work orders, service levels, and a peer assessment.

In addition to the analysis, the proposed beautification strategy has taken items like the sponsorship program and the monarch pledge into consideration to better inform beautification efforts.

Operational improvements have contributed to achieving and surpassing service levels despite growth pressures; however, citizen expectations continue to exceed current service levels.

Horticulture has generated significant benefits from reconfiguring maintenance zones, implementing reservoir planters, and implementing the Sponsorship Program; yet expectations continue to exceed current service levels.

Historical work orders identified gaps in service levels particularly for entry features, annual plantings, and weeding maintenance.

Feedback from public engagement revealed that citizens regard the City of Vaughan as a beautiful city, but entrances to neighbourhood communities via major or regional roads require more beautification efforts. Citizens want to see an increase of perennials, pollinators and tree plantings and there was a definite need to increase maintenance and service levels as most citizens indicated being “very unsatisfied” with current maintenance standards. Finally, the paradox of increasing service levels is met with a clear desire not to increase taxes as well.

Compared to our peers Vaughan horticulture operations provides a lower level of service with a comparable number of assets in peer municipalities.

While compared to our peers, Vaughan horticulture operations provides a lower level of service in several classifications. Results from a municipal scan indicate that the city is severely lagging behind in that several of Vaughan’s service levels receive approximately 50% less maintenance than those surveyed.

Table 1: Weeding Service Levels

<u>Classification</u>	Weeding Service Levels (occurrences per season)			
	Vaughan	Markham	Brampton	Richmond Hill
Premium	6	↑ 18	↑ 44	↑ 44
Enhanced	3	↑ 18	↑ 22	↑ 10
Standard	2	↑ 3	↑ 11	↑ 5
Basic	1	1	↑ 12	On Request

Table 2: Pruning and Mulching Service Levels

<u>Classification</u>	Pruning and Mulching Service Levels (occurrences per annum)			
	Vaughan	Markham	Brampton	Richmond Hill
Premium	1	1	As Required	As Required
Enhanced	1/2	↑ 1	As Required	As Required
Standard	1/2	1/2	As Required	As Required
Basic	1/3	1/3	As Required	As Required

The proposed service levels reflect an equitable and standardized approach that is transparent and responsive to Council, our Citizens, and the increased demands due to continued growth.

The proposed classifications ensure equity and transparency while providing a greater service level that meet citizens’ expectations. The following four (4) classification are proposed.

1. **Significant City Sites:** applies to locations of civic importance and village centers. These sites will receive improved maintenance compared to existing service levels.
2. **Neighbourhood Entrances and Community Hubs:** applies to the existing entrances to neighbourhood communities on main roads, community centres, and libraries. These locations have high visibility; they welcome citizens and visitors to the community. These sites will have heightened maintenance compared to current existing service levels.

3. **Boulevards and Side Streets:** applies to sites located on streets adjacent to major roads that border a community but are not an entry point. This classification also applies to secondary roads inside communities. These sites with existing vegetation will have greater weeding and pruning service levels.
4. **Medians and Roundabouts:** these sites are located on both major and secondary roads and will be created into pollinator gardens. Pollinator gardens include plants that support birds, butterflies, bees, and beetles by providing both food and shelter. Supporting these species is important as they are responsible for pollinating our crops and, in turn, growing the food we eat. These types of planting require minimal maintenance, which also keep our crews safe by reducing the amount of time they need to work roadside. Less maintenance also means fewer lane shutdowns, lessening the roadway and traffic interruptions.

Table 3: Proposed Weeding Service Levels

<u>Classification</u>	Weeding Service Levels			
	Current		Proposed	
	Service Delivery (visits/ season)	Meeting Citizen Expectation	Change in Service Level	Service Level (visits/ season)
Significant City Sites	6	✓	↑ Increase x2	12
Neighbourhood Entrances and Community Hubs	3	✗	↑ Increase x2	6
Boulevards and Side Street	1	✗	↑ Increase x3	3
Medians and Roundabouts	N/A	N/A	Establish Service Level	1

Table 4: Proposed Pruning and Mulching Service Levels

<u>Classification</u>	Pruning and Mulching Service Levels			
	Current State		Proposed	
	Service Delivery (visits/ year)	Meeting Citizen Expectation	Change in service level	Service Level (visits/ year)
Significant City Sites	1	✓	No change	1
Neighbourhood Entrances and Community Hubs	1 Every 2 Years	✓	No change	1 Every 2 Years
Boulevards and Side Street	1 Every 2 Years	✗	No change	1 Every 2 Years
Medians and Roundabouts	N/A	N/A	Establish Service Level	1 Every 3 Years

In collaboration with Municipal Partnership Office, staff see value in continuing the Grow with Vaughan Sponsorship program as presented to Council in June 2020.

In collaboration Municipal Partnership Office staff see value in continuing the Grow with Vaughan Sponsorship program as presented to Council in June 2020. The sponsorship program has achieved over \$38,000 with 21 beds being sponsored by local businesses. This revenue will help offset operational costs associated to horticultural displays across the City, while contributing to beautification efforts.

Staff recommends that implementation of the proposed beautification strategy be completed with service level increase and bed renewals in a phased approach.

The implementation of increase service levels will be done according to approved budget increases. Each year, service levels will be reviewed against performance and citizen expectations.

The implementation for renewals will follow a two-phased approach. Phase 1 will include enhancing neighborhood entrances and community hubs, medians, and roundabouts to ensure that they are realigned with the new proposed classifications from 2022 to 2025. Phase 2 will include boulevards and side streets for realignment from 2025 to 2028.

This phased approach will allow horticulture operations to monitor each phase and allow room to pivot if needed to address unforeseen shortfalls, adjust operational needs and financial impact.

Financial Impact

Annual operating costs to address increase of service levels will be evaluated as part of the budget process.

While there is no impact toward approving this report at this time, the program will require an operating and capital investment which will be brought forward during the 2022 budget process.

The total operational funding impact is estimated at \$622,500, implemented over the next three (3) years.

The capital impact cost to develop and to implement the strategy is estimated at \$260,000 in capital over the next three (3) years.

The total financial Impact of project is summarized in Table 5.

Table 5: Total Financial Impact

Item	Financial Impact 2022	Financial Impact 2023	Financial Impact 2024
Net New Capital; Materials and Equipment (Vehicles and Perennial Plant Material)	\$140,000	\$60,000	\$60,000
Net New Operating; Labour (on going)	\$207,500	\$207,500	\$207,500
Total Operating / Year	\$207,500	\$415,000	\$622,500

Requests for capital and operating funding to implement the Beautification 2.0 Strategy will be considered as part of the annual budgeting process and evaluated against other City priorities.

Broader Regional Impacts/Considerations

York region property is out of scope of this project. Items within the current jurisdiction of York Region that is currently maintained by the City of Vaughan will be consolidated.

Conclusion

Horticulture Operations are committed to providing service excellence. Over the past few years, operational efficiencies have increased performance, and created new revenue streams.

To continue to with growth of city building, expectations from our citizens and promote beautification across the City of Vaughan, the renewed Beautification 2.0 is proposed.

For more information, please contact Nadia Paladino – Director of Parks, Forestry and Horticulture Operations. (ext. 6146)

Attachments:

1. *“A Beautiful Experience” (Horticulture Beautification Strategy 2.0)*

Prepared by

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