

Committee of the Whole (Working Session) Report

DATE: Wednesday, December 1, 2021

WARD(S): ALL

TITLE: VAUGHAN ENVIRONMENTAL STEWARDSHIP PROGRAM

FROM:

Zoran Postic, Deputy City Manager, Public Works

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ACTION: DECISION

Purpose

To seek approval of the newly developed Vaughan Environmental Stewardship Program, which integrates Parks, Forestry and Horticulture Operations' community programs with environmental stewardship programming provided by the Policy Planning and Special Programs department into one overarching program.

Report Highlights

- The existing Adopt-A-Park and Dazzle Me programs offered by Parks, Forestry and Horticulture Operations would benefit from renewal with an environmental sustainability lens
- The new Vaughan Environmental Stewardship Program will provide residents with a streamlined process to participate in environmental stewardship activities
- One overarching program will improve service delivery and create operational efficiencies
- The Dazzle Me program will be rebranded as the "Vaughan Environmental Stewardship Fund" and will provide funding opportunities for local community groups to implement their own greening projects
- A communications plan and online platform will promote and manage the Environmental Stewardship Program and associated Fund

Recommendations

1. That the Vaughan Environmental Stewardship Program be approved;
2. That staff be directed to develop an online platform and robust communications plan, to efficiently run the Vaughan Environmental Stewardship Program; and
3. That the Dazzle Me program be rebranded as the “Vaughan Environmental Stewardship Fund” to support community environmental stewardships activities.

Background

Green Directions Vaughan 2019 mandates the delivery of environmental stewardship opportunities to City residents.

Environmental stewardship is defined as the responsible use and protection of the natural environment. City programming focuses on engaging residents through hands-on volunteering opportunities where residents can make tangible differences in their neighbourhoods. Tree and shrub plantings, pollinator garden plantings and litter clean-ups are some of the common events.

Green Directions Vaughan 2019 (GDV 2019) promotes community sustainability actions to ensure a healthy environment, vibrant communities, and economic vitality for current and future generations. Objective 2.2 in GDV 2019 lists sustainability actions related to re-establishing the urban tree canopy and developing natural heritage stewardship and restoration programming that the Policy Planning and Special Programs (PPSP) department has been mandated to lead. Other City strategies and commitments to promote environmental stewardship opportunities for the community include:

- The 2018-2022 Terms of Council Service Excellence Strategic Plan lists Environmental Stewardship as a strategic priority
- The Mayor’s Monarch Pledge was approved by Council in 2018 with a commitment to multiple actions to support pollinator populations in the City
- The proclamation of National Pollinator Week and Flight of the Monarch Day on an annual basis to support the City’s commitment to protect pollinators and educate residents on the importance of pollinator habitat
- Through York Region’s Urban Forest Management Plan the City of Vaughan canopy cover target of approximately 26%

Participation in the “Communities in Bloom program” has led to multiple community-based environmental initiatives including Adopt-A-Park, Dazzle Me, and Curb Appeal.

In 2002, the City of Vaughan (Vaughan) participated in the Communities in Bloom Ontario program directing residents, municipalities, local organizations and businesses to improve the appearance and visual appeal of Canada’s neighbourhoods, parks, and open spaces. The program was a success in Vaughan, which led to participation in national and international editions of the program. The success of the Communities in Bloom program provided national focus for the establishment of provincial and community-based beautification programs, as well as building a spirit of community and increased civic pride.

Parks, Forestry and Horticulture Operations (PFHO) has programs that focus on community-based beautification, including:

1. Adopt-A-Park Program

The Adopt-A-Park program was established in approximately 2003 and designed as a public service volunteer initiative. The intent of this program is to offer residents and local organizations with an opportunity to adopt a neighborhood park to beautify and enhance the space. The volunteer group is recognized via a sign affixed to the Park entrance sign. The Adopt-A-Park program requires an annual commitment to organize a minimum of three planned activities and/or events at the adopted park. These activities or events could include litter clean-ups, garden bed maintenance, tree and shrub plantings and flower bed plantings. There are currently sixty (60) Adopt-A-Park signs in the City, of which zero (0) are active. There have been no new Adopt-A-Park groups approved since the program has been under review.

2. Dazzle Me Program

The Dazzle Me program was established in 2012 to provide financial support for community-based initiatives surrounding neighbourhood beautification known as the Dazzle Me Fund. Each Ward is allocated \$3,000 for a total of \$15,000 City-wide, annually. Community groups or individual residents could apply for funding for a project that would enhance the quality of their urban environment through plantings and clean-up events. In instances of multiple applications, they are evaluated, and grants are awarded, one (1) per ward, to the highest ranked application. This program has implemented a total of four (4) beautification efforts and has not received any applications since 2013.

3. Curb Appeal Program

The Curb Appeal Program was launched in 2003 and annually recognizes seven-hundred and fifty (750) homeowners and businesses that demonstrate exceptional pride and effort in the maintenance of their properties. This program has consistently generated significant interest in the community and is largely volunteer run. In 2021, over 1,000 nominations were submitted, the highest level of community interest to-date.

4. Tree and/or Bench Dedication Program

Residents and community groups can apply to dedicate a tree and/or bench in a local park to commemorate a loved one. This program has been consistently successful. In 2021, the City received fourteen (14) tree and three (3) bench dedications requests.

In addition to PFHO programs, the City hosts the 20-Minute Makeover annually and coordinates ad-hoc clean-up and tree planting community initiatives.

Environmental Sustainability staff in the PPSP department have successfully executed the annual 20-Minute Makeover event established as an effort to involve the community in litter clean-ups in tandem with Earth Day. Public tree and shrub plantings in partnership with community groups and other organizations have also been organized based on ad hoc funding opportunities.

In addition, staff currently react to resident requests on an ad hoc basis. There is a growing need to explore a more straightforward method for residents and community groups to register for City events and to also provide a way for residents to run their own environmental stewardship events.

There is an emerging need to increase awareness and participation, and improve the management of these community initiatives.

Currently, there is no formalized procedure to create, promote, and run environmental stewardship events based on community interest. PFHO and PPSP staff communicate with volunteers on a one-on-one basis via e-mail or telephone, with no tracking available for other staff to see whether a volunteer has been replied to, filled out the correct waiver, etc. There is also no centralized database for the community to access to view planned community events or a way to track deliverables (e.g. trees planted, number of garbage bags collected) between departments.

There is also an opportunity to modernize current environmental stewardship programming to meet environmental sustainability goals.

The following summarizes current opportunities for enhancement of existing programs/initiatives:

1. Adopt-A-Park Program

There is an opportunity to address the cost and permanency associated with signage for the Adopt-A-Park program. While the Adopt-A-Park signs provide recognition for the volunteer groups efforts; throughout the program's history, ongoing participation of stewardship activities diminished following the first year. The signage cost (approximately \$1,500 per sign) is not suitable for a short-term initiative. Additionally, there is no policy in place to determine when a sign could be removed. Staff also surmise the signs deter other groups from performing activities in parks, which is not conducive to an inclusive environmental stewardship program that encourages annual participation from all community members.

2. Dazzle Me Program

There is an opportunity to address the lack of participation in the program. This is partially due to the lack of knowledge by local residents and community groups of the program, as there is no communication plan to promote the fund. There is also a need to review local residents and community groups continuous ownership and maintenance for the projects they deliver.

3. Curb Appeal Program

The Curb Appeal program continues to be a well-received and thriving program with minimal cost implications to the City. There is opportunity to further streamline administration of this program through an online platform.

4. Ad Hoc Community Initiatives

There is an opportunity to better track, promote, and manage ad hoc requests for community clean-ups, tree plantings, and other environmental stewardship initiatives.

There is a clear need to modernize and rebrand the Adopt-A-Park and Dazzle Me programs into one overarching program where we will not only focus on the beautification of public spaces, but also include an environmental sustainability approach.

Previous Reports/Authority

Previous reports considered by City Council regarding the various initiatives considered in the new Vaughan Environmental Stewardship Program can be found at the following links:

[Extract from the Council meeting of May 27, 2002](#) (Item 4, Report No. 39 of the Committee of the Whole) – Communities in Bloom Initiatives

[Extract from the Council meeting of December 15, 2003](#) (Item 4, Report No. 72 of the Committee of the Whole) – Council approved Communities in Bloom

[Extract from the Council meeting of December 12, 2005](#) (Item 8, Report No. 7 of the Budget Committee) - Council approved Communities in Bloom
Council approved Operating Budget – Full Cost of the Communities in Bloom Program

[Extract from the Council meeting of March 20, 2018](#) (Item 13, Report No. 10 of the Committee of the Whole) – Council adopted the Mayor’s Monarch Pledge

[Extract from the Council meeting of December 17, 2019](#) (Item 7, Report No. 39 of the Committee of the Whole) – Council adopted Green Directions Vaughan 2019

[Extract from the Council meeting of May 27, 2020](#) (Item 11, Report No. 20 of the Committee of the Whole) – Council approved a proclamation request for National Pollinator Week and Flight of the Monarchs Day

Analysis and Options

The integration of existing programs into an overarching program will enhance community involvement and improve service delivery.

The integration of existing environmental stewardship programs will provide the following benefits:

- Improve service delivery through one streamlined platform to manage volunteers, assist in the implementation of stewardship events and record deliverables across both PFHO and PPSP departments. The Program will provide a streamlined process for potential volunteers to register for environmental programming, obtain information, and coordinate and schedule their requested event
- Provide a Community Recognition program to keep residents engaged

- Help meet the City’s sustainability targets while beautifying local spaces through the rebranding of the Dazzle Me Program
- Meet tangible sustainability targets, by expanding the scope of program to include Regional and Municipal initiatives mandated in GDV 2019 and through the Mayor’s Monarch Pledge
- Continue to provide a funding mechanism for resident and community-based projects to address requests to create new pollinator gardens and to plant more trees/shrubs annually
- Assist in collecting data for GDV 2019 and Regional indicators. By monitoring the Vaughan Environmental Stewardship Program, staff will be to determine uptake and how to further improve the Program

The overarching Vaughan Environmental Stewardship Program will provide an accessible platform for residents and community groups to get involved in and obtain more information about environmental stewardship opportunities. The Program will be organized into two categories: Community-led and City-led events. They are as follows:

1. Community-led events
 - a. Litter clean-ups in local parks/trails/open spaces
 - b. Pollinator garden plantings
 - c. Tree/shrub plantings
 - d. Educational opportunities in partnership with environmental organizations (future consideration)
2. City-led events
 - a. Litter clean-up events, including the 20-Minute Makeover
 - b. Corporate tree planting events
 - c. Tree and/or Bench Dedication (future consideration)

The Vaughan Environmental Stewardship Program would allow any interested groups to participate in litter clean-ups and plantings in any City park where feasible, while also providing the flexibility to run a different number of events annually. This will effectively eliminate the need for the “Adopt-A-Park” branding, resulting in the removal of associated signage, and encourage all groups to work together to perform environmental stewardship activities. This will also effectively eliminate the need for the “Dazzle Me” branding.

Vaughan Environmental Stewardship Program and associated Fund will provide additional breadth of opportunities for community stewardship.

Over the past several years, the Dazzle Me funding has gone unspent. At the same time, requests from community groups to create new pollinator gardens and plant

trees/shrubs cannot be fulfilled due to funding constraints. Staff are recommending the rebranding of Dazzle Me and reallocation of the fund to the Vaughan Environmental Stewardship Program. The Fund will provide a mechanism for local groups to implement community-based projects in their local neighborhoods. Schools will also be eligible to participate in the funding as public agencies.

The application process to access the funds will be amended to define the parameters of eligibility to access the funds. All projects will be implemented on public lands. The pollinator gardens applications will include a maintenance commitment for the gardens to be maintained into the future.

There is a need for a volunteer management tool to effectively manage the Vaughan Environmental Stewardship Program.

Currently, stewardship events and volunteers are managed through e-mail exchanges. With increasing interest to participate in environmental stewardship activities, capacity to manage the coordination of events has been a challenge, and unsustainable with continued growth.

The Vaughan Environmental Stewardship Program will require an easy-to-use and accessible online platform for the use of community groups to:

- Register for environmental stewardship events led by the City (e.g. public planting events)
- Request the creation of their own events (e.g. litter clean-ups), with request City support where needed
- Obtain general background information on stewardship events or updates to events
- Obtain any relevant waivers or paperwork required for volunteers

The Vaughan Environmental Stewardship Program online platform will assist in data collection and monitoring once established. The data collected will add to the tracked indicators for GDV 2019 (e.g. number of tree and shrubs planted per year, number of pollinator beds established per year) and will also assist staff in determining the level of community engagement and how to further improve the Program.

To appropriately manage the Vaughan Environmental Stewardship Program, staff will need to conduct further research to identify requirements for a suitable online platform that includes volunteer management, event registration, and documenting deliverables.

A communications plan will be required to effectively launch the Vaughan Environmental Stewardship Program.

Staff recommend that a communications plan be prepared for the launch of the Vaughan Environmental Stewardship Program, with a target launch date in Q2 2022. The communications plan will also examine opportunities to recognize residents, community groups and businesses who are actively participating in the Program via online platforms. The rebranding and the communications plan associated with the Program will be completed in collaboration with the Corporate and Strategic Communications department.

City staff will also develop applicable administrative policies and procedures to formalize the Vaughan Environmental Stewardship Program.

Financial Impact

The Dazzle Me program funds currently has an operating budget of \$15,000 per year that will be reallocated to the Vaughan Environmental Stewardship Program. There are no proposed changes to this funding at this time. However, City staff will be monitoring the success of the fund and will determine if an increase in budget is needed.

Through a best management practice review, City staff will determine which volunteer management tool is needed to support the Vaughan Environmental Stewardship Program, with a request made through the annual budget cycle.

Depending on Vaughan Environmental Stewardship Program uptake, PFHO and PPSP may require increased funding for additional materials and supplies to continue running environmental stewardship events (e.g. garbage bags, vegetation to plant, etc.), and any such requests will be made through the annual budget cycle.

Broader Regional Impacts/Considerations

The new Vaughan Environmental Stewardship Program will support Regional programming and initiatives as follows:

The Regional Municipality Greening Strategy Action 2012 supports a sustainable natural environment by developing a framework to promote environmental sustainability initiatives through the creation of partnerships and restoration initiatives, land securement and education and programming. Through this Program we will meet the

actions by planting trees and public land naturalization as well as community awareness.

The Regional Municipality of York's Urban Forest Management Plan 2017 has set a canopy cover target of 26% for the City of Vaughan. With this formalized program, City staff will document and account for increase tree canopy cover for the City. In 2017, the Regional Municipality of York signed the National Wildlife Federation Mayors Monarch Pledge. Vaughan is meeting the Mayors Monarch Pledge actions by creating the Vaughan Environmental Stewardship Program as it promotes the planting of pollinator gardens and supporting monarch butterfly habitat.

Conclusion

The new Vaughan Environmental Stewardship Program and the associated Fund will provide Vaughan residents and community groups with one centralized platform for communication for all environmental stewardship activities. This will allow for a streamline process that will not only provide for financing and resource efficiencies but will also improve service delivery.

For more information, please contact Nadia Paladino, Director Parks, Forestry and Horticulture Operations, ext. 6146 and/or Ruth Rendon, Senior Environmental Planner, Policy Planning and Special Programs, ext. 8104.

Attachments

N/A

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