



"State of the Town" Address

Mayor Dave Barrow

Richmond Hill Chamber of Commerce Annual Mayor's Luncheon

Friday, October 4, 2013

Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen,

I always look forward to this annual event. It's a great opportunity for us all to get together and hear about our town.

Today I'd like to talk to you about our progress so far on Richmond Hill's Economic Development Strategy, as well as other quality-of-life initiatives that illustrate why Richmond Hill continues to be a place you choose to live and work.

I'd like to start off by looking in the rearview mirror.

We're coming to the end of our 140th anniversary year and it's worth noting the changes Richmond Hill has witnessed since our incorporation as a village in 1873.

The business sector in the late 1800s looked a lot different. Instead of national corporate headquarters, our most important corporate citizens were places like this blacksmith shop.

And there were still larger companies that employed local residents.

In fact, in the early 1900s several large greenhouse operations were built here to grow roses, which as you know lead to Richmond Hill being crowned the "Rose Capital" of Canada.

Believe it or not, those early economic foundations helped bring us to where we are today, and to the collective vision of Richmond Hill as a town *where people come together to build our community*.

That vision was adopted in 2009 as part of our strategic plan.

One of the initiatives identified in the plan to help realize our vision was creating an Economic Development Strategy, which brings together Council, the business community and Richmond Hill staff together to build a strong economic foundation.

The Economic Development Strategy also helps to achieve our overall goals of stronger connections, better choice, a more vibrant Richmond Hill and wise management of our resources.

Our Economic Development Strategy has its own vision and 4 goals.

The vision is:

sustained economic growth built on innovation, investment, entrepreneurship, creativity and quality of place.

This vision speaks to where we want to be in the future, recognizing our strengths as well as potential opportunities to fulfill our economic potential.

Four goals support the vision and identify areas of focus: small business, the importance of creativity to the economy, attracting business and industry, and how we approach economic development.

Each goal has a number of specific actions that will help ensure our success. As you know, in Richmond Hill, plans don't sit on the shelf. They're on desks, being used every day.

The economic development task force leads the implementation of the Economic Development Strategy, but many of the initiatives are based on partnerships with the community. All are dependant on people coming together to create a strong economic foundation for Richmond Hill.

Goal 1 is for Richmond Hill to become a centre for small business support and innovation. The notion is that this will drive growth in entrepreneurship and business development in the region.

You know as members of the Chamber, most of our businesses are small businesses.

This goal recognizes the foundational role that all of you play in developing a strong economy and seeks to support those businesses.

To support small business, staff have worked to expand and promote online resources over the past year, including an inventory of available office space facilities, videos on a variety of business subjects and grants and financing databases. You can find resources to help you on the website.

Expansion of online tools has increased the Small Business Enterprise Centre website views from about 25,000 in 2011 to 42,000 in 2012, demonstrating that people are finding these tools useful.

We also continue to support small business through the work of the SBEC. Between the fall of 2012 and summer 2013, 19 seminars were offered on a variety of topics and more than 400 people attended these seminars. You are coming out and responding and supporting our efforts – and we need your input.

In June of this year, Richmond Hill's SBEC hosted the 4th York Region Import/Export conference. This conference is a partnership event between Vaughan, Markham, York Region and ourselves and focuses on the potential of importing and exporting to international markets.

Also, throughout the past summer, SBEC supported 11 students in the Summer Company Program, which provides small provincial grants. Enterprising Richmond Hill students in the program started a wide range of businesses, everything from soaps to dog accessories to longboards... for those of you who don't know, that's a new type of skate board.

The Summer Company students had a mini trade show at our offices, and one of the students had a tray of cupcakes – she was the most popular booth in the room.

Staff will maintain the momentum we've created toward supporting small business in Richmond Hill by continuing to update and distribute support materials and build relationships with organizations.

Goal 2 of the Economic Development Strategy is for Richmond Hill to be the Creative Centre of York Region.

This goal recognizes the importance of the creative economy. Richmond Hill's skilled workforce, high quality of life and existing concentration of creative businesses have given it a competitive advantage that must be protected and enhanced.

Over the past year, two high priority action items helped to advance this goal: the Creative Industries Symposium, which I know that many of you attend, and our work to attract a Post-Secondary Institution.

Richmond Hill hosted the 2nd annual Creative Industries Symposium, attended by approximately 300 people.

This symposium has allowed Richmond Hill to demonstrate leadership in growing the creative economy by creating new opportunities for connection between local creative businesses.

Hosting this event has helped strengthen our reputation as a creative centre. For those who attended, you understand how great this event is... the speakers were amazing! The third symposium is coming up on November 8 at the Richmond Hill Centre for the Performing Arts.

We believe that building a creative community also builds a vibrant, attractive, resilient and competitive community.

We have also collaborated with York Region to develop a Post-Secondary Investment Strategy which is expected to be finalized early in the fall.

We have also focused on our own post-secondary attraction efforts by maintaining and expanding contacts with 13 local colleges and universities with respect to programs or potential partnerships for local businesses.

Creating a Post-Secondary Strategy doesn't necessarily require a physical campus. We can have success by focusing on relationships and creating innovative opportunities for learning, as well as ways for businesses to partner with institutions.

Goal 3 is location, location, location... to attract business that will sustain and grow our local economy by focusing on those businesses in the creative and technology based sectors.

This goal recognizes that Richmond Hill has built a competitive advantage in four sectors and must continue to act strategically to enhance attractiveness in these areas.

The 4 key sectors are:

- Professional, Scientific and Technical services
- Health Industries
- Finance & Insurance
- Information & Culture

Although all businesses in Richmond Hill are key to our economic success, these 4 sectors provide the most opportunity for growth and best alignment with our educated workforce.

Each of the strategy's goals support growth in these four sectors.

Organized and hosted by the town and other partners, MedEdge is the premier life sciences business event in York Region.

It has become a catalyst for advancing ideas, connections and innovation into commercial success, supporting both the Health sector and the Scientific/Technical sector.

The third MedEdge event was held in June at the theatre and was attended by approximately 450 people. I'm sure many of you were there to witness its success.

Richmond Hill has expanded its partnership activities over the past year in an effort to further market our value proposition as The Smart Place for Business.

In addition to sponsoring and partnering with the York Technology Alliance and Venture Lab, we are now working with Life Sciences Ontario, the Society of Manufacturing Engineers and the Toronto Financial Services Alliance to advance growth in our sectors.

Going forward, we will continue to build relationships with new industry partners and associations, building our presence in those sectors and supporting our reputation as an attractive community.

Goal 4 is to deliver a best in class approach to economic development that is based on engagement with our business leaders – many of whom are here today – and having a brand which identifies Richmond Hill as a premier business location, and The Smart Place to Do Business.

This goal recognizes that a sophisticated marketing tool kit and strong community brand are necessary to successfully deliver economic development programs.

We were recognized early this year by the Economic Developers Council of Ontario (EDCO) for a piece of our marketing tool kit – our *Community Economic Development Profile*. The profile illustrates why Richmond Hill is attractive to new and existing businesses.

To engage local business, we have continued the Corporate Calling Program where we meet with local companies to better justify our role and understand the company and its needs.

During the past year, staff conducted 82 corporate calls and were able to connect businesses to resources and strengthen business relationships.

In addition to the corporate calling program, Richmond Hill Council and Staff continue to engage with leaders in local business, education and government through the Business Leadership Council.

Over the past year we hosted four successful meetings of the BLC, helping us develop a shared understanding of the issues impacting those who choose to work in Richmond Hill.

After all, who could be better to ask about why Richmond Hill is a great place to live and work than somebody who has already chosen to locate here.

Overall, the Economic Development Strategy sets the foundation of where we're going. With 3 years of implementation completed, significant progress has been made towards achieving the vision and goals for economic development in our community.

But the Economic Development Strategy is just one of the many parts of the whole picture. There are many initiatives and factors that combine to make our town a desirable location for both businesses and residents.

For example, our tax rates remain among the lowest in the 27 municipalities of the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area.

Our commercial and industrial tax rates are third lowest and second lowest, respectively, of the 27 municipalities in the GTHA, which is important to maintain our business-friendly atmosphere and continue to promote economic development. Having these low rates helps keep us competitive.

We have the fourth lowest residential rate, behind only Toronto, Milton and Markham. While maintaining our low tax rate, we also provide neighbourhood amenities like new and revamped parks, pools and community centres for all residents to enjoy. We are careful to balance fiscal responsibility with quality of life initiatives and amenities – amenities that you told us are important in the last community survey.

If you recall:

74% of you said that all the services provided by the town are important. That includes everything from recreation programs to fire protection to garbage and recycling.

81% of you told us that you're satisfied with a majority of the services.

And an overwhelming majority of 94% said that they are satisfied with Richmond Hill as a place to live. I couldn't agree more.

You told us that we're on the right track – which is the impetus for our Strategic Plan, and the many other initiatives that spring from it.

For example, earlier this year Council approved Richmond Hill's new Parks Plan, which will guide our decision-making regarding the appropriate amount, location, development and programming of our parks and outdoor recreation facilities to the year 2031.

A lot of research and public consultation, as you know, went into the Plan, because we know that our community cares about their parks. We also know how important it is to carefully manage parkland along with the rest of the development going on in our growing town, maintaining our standards and ratios of open space that you enjoy.

Our Parks Plan gives us the tools and justification to support the parkland requirements in our Official Plan.

In addition, we're getting close to finalizing the Recreation Plan, which will guide the future direction of recreation facilities, programs and services.

Both these plans involved a lot of community feedback, in many forms. Thank-you for taking the time to share your ideas – and for your continued participation in planning your community.

The development of the Environmental Strategy – called *Greening the Hill* – kicked off early this year, too. Richmond Hill is committed to becoming an environmentally sustainable community. We continue to hear from both residents and businesses that protecting the environment is an important priority

Greening the Hill will build on the many successful and award-winning environmental initiatives already underway in Richmond Hill. We'll identify ways to actively manage and protect our local environment now, and for future generations.

And speaking of working together, we were very pleased that earlier this year the OMB supported our mediated settlement for the David Dunlap Observatory Land.

Our made-in-Richmond Hill solution, where five different parties worked together to hammer out a settlement regarding the natural and cultural heritage of the lands, is a great example of different parties – with different interests – working together to achieve a better Richmond Hill. And now 56% of the site is protected from development and will become part of our parks system and move into town ownership.

The OMB announcement said that our settlement “represents good planning and overall, is in the public interest.” That’s always our aim in Richmond Hill.

Also, Richmond Hill received an Excellence Canada Ontario Accessibility Award in recognition of our commitment to providing exceptional customer service for people with disabilities. We have a multi-year Accessibility Plan in place, and we are investing gas tax dollars to further improve accessibility at the municipal level.

Richmond Hill has also been recognized this year with:

A Gold Smart Commute workplace designation from Metrolinx – and thank you to the Chamber of Commerce and Smart Commute for your involvement and support of this program.

A Gold Level Youth Friendly Community Award from Play Works,

A Parks and Recreation Ontario Award for design of East Humber Trail, and

A Gas Tax Award from the Association of Municipalities of Ontario for the Oak Ridges Community Centre

We have also been declared a Top Place to Live by *MoneySense* magazine, as well as

A top 5 ‘City of the Future’ by *Foreign Direct Investment* magazine.

We’re winning awards, and so are our businesses.

Five Richmond Hill businesses (Compugen, Illumiti, Visual Defence Inc., Locus Systems Inc., and Intertainment Media Inc.) are on the 2013 Braham300 list of top Canadian Information and Communications Technology companies.

BMW Group Canada was named one of the 2013 “Best Workplaces in Canada” in the category for large and multinational organizations.

Three Richmond Hill businesses were honoured last year in the 14th annual *Profit & Chatelaine* magazines ranking of Canada’s Top 100 Firms run by female entrepreneurs. The local businesses are Kids & Company Ltd, Kenilworth Publishing & Media Inc, and FouFou dog.

And that’s just a small sample of the award-winning companies in Richmond Hill. We celebrate more successes on the economic development website: business.richmondhill.ca

One of the important issues that will keep Richmond Hill in the top echelon of places to live and places to do business – is transit.

I was very happy to be part of the opening in august of the first phase of rapidway bus lanes along Hwy 7 – four months ahead of schedule and under budget.

The 2.5-kilometre stretch between Bayview Avenue and Hwy 404, on the border of Richmond Hill and Markham, is the first rapidway in York Region, and the first in Ontario also. It features dedicated bike lanes and wider boulevards so that all residents can enjoy that transformation of Highway 7.

Next up for Richmond Hill rapidways is the stretch of Yonge Street between Hwy 7 and Major Mackenzie. Construction for the Yonge Street lanes will start next year, and it should be complete by 2017.

The Viva buses on the rapidways will eventually connect commuters to subways – both the Spadina line extension in Vaughan and the one that is most important to us: the Yonge Street subway extension to Richmond Hill.

We as a community must advocate for that Yonge subway extension.

It's the number two project of Metrolinx after the downtown relief line that will create the capacity required for the extension.

We recently met with the Honourable Glen Murray, Minister of Transportation and Infrastructure, to promote the Richmond Hill subway but also to ensure that the preliminary work that needs to be done on the Yonge Street line stays on track. We insisted concurrent work be done.

The Yonge subway extension is estimated to be a \$3.4 billion project, so the most important issue still is how to fund it. We need to find dedicated funding, accountable funding, fair funding and sustainable funding.

In my opinion, not necessarily new taxes but perhaps a reallocation of existing taxes such as HST and gas tax.

That would include the federal government in the solution.

In April, Metrolinx released its investment strategy which includes proposals for raising the funds, and now they have referred it to an advisory panel to review the investment strategy.

Richmond Hill will be part of the discussions that lead to decisions on transit funding, to help ensure it's a fair solution for residents and for businesses too.

We also continue to work with York Region to complete detailed planning of the subway, including a new underground train storage facility which will need to be near the end of the subway line, in Richmond Hill.

The discussions in Toronto are only about what was already allocated to them. It is not jeopardizing 'our' project other than to distract the process we need to take place on funding options.

Thanks to the Chamber for their involvement in keeping this file in the spotlight.

As Richmond Hill nears the end of its 140th anniversary, we are reminded of how far we have come. We have transformed from 'that village along the Yonge street corridor' into a Town recognized as the place to be in the future.

And now on to the next 140 years...

I look forward to working with you as we continue to build our community together.

I think we're all in agreement that we want – and we expect – our future Richmond Hill to be a place we will always be proud to call home.

Nobody can predict the future, but I expect it's sure to be exciting!

Thanks very much for coming, ladies and gentlemen.