



Richmond Hill: Imagine Our Future

2021 State of the City Address

Acting Mayor Joe DiPaola

Address to Richmond Hill Board of Trade

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Sheraton Parkway Toronto North Hotel and Suites

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Richmond Hill: Imagine Our Future

What makes a great city?

Cities such as London, New York, Paris, Tokyo or Rome might immediately come to mind. They are rich in heritage and forged their presence through the industrial revolution to become thriving commercial, financial, manufacturing and cultural centres. They are high in diversity, education and innovation, and frequently serve as headquarters for multinational corporations.

However, has this changed over time? What are the factors that make a great city today? Moreover, what does that mean for Richmond Hill?

Those questions frame the theme of my remarks today: Richmond Hill: Imagine Our Future

A foundation to build on

I believe Richmond Hill also has a great heritage and a strong foundation on which to build our future.

Let me elaborate.

Among other things, great cities have highly integrated and efficient transit and transportation systems. They allow people, goods and services to move from A to B efficiently.

In Richmond Hill, we enjoy one of the best transportation and transit nodes in the GTA with highways 407 and 404. Coupled with this are our modernized VIVA and YRT transit systems and our GO Transit. GO train service has expanded to Bloomington Station, providing more residents regular rush hour service to and from the northern part of our city.

These links are essential to connect our city, and to drive economic growth and spur job and housing opportunities.

Richmond Hill also enjoys a great public realm with public places, open streetscapes and a large number places for social interaction and recreation. Yonge Street and Highway 7 are great examples of a quickly emerging commercial realm with walkable opportunities.

The Yonge Street corridor will continue to serve as the City's primary focus for intensification. It will provide a mix of land uses and services to maximize development and the efficient use of land and investment.

The jewel of this area will be the completion of our vision for the new Richmond Hill Centre – our new downtown – but more about that later.

Public realm research confirms that natural areas and open spaces for recreation and social interaction are increasingly more important within a city. Right now Richmond Hill benefits from over 167 parks, 150 kilometres of trails and over 600 acres of natural areas.

We have a great partnership with the Toronto Region Conservation Authority for many of these parks and open spaces.

Within these natural areas, there also are five beautiful, natural glacial lakes.

These glacial kettle lakes serve as the headwaters for three significant river systems – the Humber, Rouge and Don Rivers, which all join at Jefferson and Bathurst, and all flow into Lake Ontario.

There are very few municipalities in the GTA who can boast a similar lakeside experience. These lakes provides residents and visitors a highly accessible, unique waterfront experience right here in our backyard.

Lake Wilcox, one of my favourites, is the most noteworthy, providing a beautiful pedestrian boardwalk and an extraordinary outdoor park facility for residents of all ages.

All these natural areas and green spaces provide a special and unique experience for our residents. With these areas is lush and extensive tree coverage helping to maximize a natural outdoor experience.

Global recognition

In fact, the Arbor Day Foundation and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations named Richmond Hill a Tree City of the World, one of only fifteen cities to receive this honour. Through our Urban Forest Management plan, we are committed to protecting and enhancing our urban forest and woodlot canopy with ambitious targets for more tree planting.

Richmond Hill was also recognized this year with a Platinum certification, for the second year, from the World Council on City Data.

With this certification, we were ranked in the top-ten comparator cities by the World Council for low public street light energy consumption, nursing personnel per capita, low greenhouse gas levels and our diverse population. This ranking is highly significant because we are compared with a global network of 30 countries and comparator Canadian cities.

Property taxes and affordability

Now, let's talk about taxes and affordability.

I have yet to hear one resident say to me 'My taxes are too low!'

Nevertheless, in our case, we do have the third lowest tax rate of all the municipalities in the GTA. However, we know home taxes are frequently misunderstood.

Since taxes are calculated by tax rate, Richmond Hill residents enjoy some of the lowest taxes in the GTA, based on home value.

As the City's Budget Chief, I have pushed hard for low tax rates. I was very gratified to receive the support of staff and Council in providing 0% tax rate increase for 2021.

These efforts will continue for 2022.

We all know that housing affordability is top of mind for many in Richmond Hill and other cities. It continues to be a rising issue. To address this, I was very pleased that Regional Council approved my motion to declare a housing affordability crisis in York Region.

Our current Official Plan update process is addressing this issue head on and looking for solutions through City Plan 2041. This is particularly important for planning Richmond Hill Centre, which will be a highly significant transit-oriented community.

Richmond Hill Centre is extremely significant for our growth and we are nearing the completion of a secondary plan for this area. The plan will ensure this strategic growth centre, including the new subway stations, will become a complete, transit-oriented community.

Council strategic priorities

Our broad city planning process began with Council identifying the strategic priorities for focus.

Council identified **four main strategic priorities** moving forward:

Balancing Growth and Green

Fiscal responsibility

Strong Sense of Belonging

Getting Around the City

Getting around means ensuing residents are able to shop, enjoy our cultural and natural amenities, and do this easily by rail, bus, car, bicycle or walking.

Many individual plans and initiatives are underway that will feed into our overall Official Plan, and are based on our four strategic priorities.

Addressing climate change

Addressing climate change is one of those planning efforts. Climate change is certainly foremost in the minds of many, especially our youth who will inherit our actions.

Our Resilient Richmond Hill work will address climate change through our Community Energy and Emissions Plan, recently approved by Council.

This plan is our path to a low carbon future.

It will guide our actions in reducing greenhouse gas emissions, conserving energy and exploring economic opportunities. While our world ranking for carbon emissions is excellent, we can do more—and we will.

Establishing rooftop gardens, planting more trees, providing a more walkable community and use of energy efficient technologies for lighting, computers, air conditioning, and public transit, and moving to zero waste and use of renewable energies are all part of this plan.

This approach is also important for managing over 300,000 city infrastructure assets and delivering critical services.

We are managing over 1000 kilometres of roads, 800 kilometres of sidewalks, over 16,000 street lights, 85 storm water ponds, 650 kilometres of storm sewers and 18,000 catch basins.

It is a huge job, and our *Asset Management Plan* is essential to managing these assets. This plan, endorsed by Council this year, ensures we are providing safe, efficient and cost-effective management of our city's infrastructure. The plan also factors in changing demographic trends, growth and the City's Climate Change Framework.

Richmond Hill is already a very green community, and that has been supported by our environment strategy, *Greening the Hill: Our Community, Our Future*. Approved in 2014, it provides the direction to protect, enhance and restore our natural environment.

To track our progress we released our Environmental Scorecard in 2021. The Scorecard provides a snapshot of the City's environmental progress and achievements through the first five years of the strategy. We are now updating this strategy with help from the community and we just completed two public workshops.

A sustainable approach to our planning ensures economic and social activities remain a top priority for healthy living – today and for generations to come.

A great example is the new Oak Ridges Library.

It's a beautiful architectural design with features that helped us achieve Silver LEED certification. This is a great achievement for any public building, reflecting a very high level of attention to advanced sustainable design features.

All these initiatives and plans reflect the important actions we are taking to support sustainable and carefully planned growth.

City planning

It also brings me back to our Official Plan update – called City Plan 2041.

Now it is time for us to look back at our successes, areas for improvement and to establish a new and revitalized vision for the city for the next 20 years. This is a significant exercise requiring careful thought and public consultation.

With the help of our residents, I believe we have an outstanding future ahead of us, and one that will see our city rise to preeminence in the GTA – if not Canada. We have the foundation in place, and developments over the next ten years will position us very well.

This plan will be the single most important guidepost and reference document for the next 20 years. It is happening at a critical juncture of a number of evolving developments within the city. We need to get it right and ensure growth reflects the aspirations and expectations of our next generation of residents.

Despite the COVID pandemic, we worked hard at providing public consultation opportunities. We are continuing to meet with business groups, landowners and community representatives. We've held numerous local community workshops, despite COVID restrictions.

In August, we published our *What We Heard* report and then embarked on our playbook as an Official Plan update.

These updates articulated several emerging directions for consideration: Direct growth to centres and corridors; support economic development by enabling more jobs; and ensure growth is environmentally and economically sustainable.

It also noted emerging issues to be addressed such as housing affordability; climate change mitigation and adaptation; and accommodation for diversity of lifestyles.

We know the pandemic has resulted in fundamental changes in our lifestyle preferences at work and play, particularly our offices of the future. New work models, aging population, growth in the knowledge industry, enhanced transit systems, mobility technologies, online retail, housing affordability and climate change are all at play in determining our new direction.

Moving forward we know competition for attracting talent will grow. Richmond Hill needs to be at the top of the list to attract talent. Attracting this talent requires us to design and innovate a complete live / work / play community.

It means highly efficient and accessible transit, walkable streets and walkways lined with cafes, unique shops, and amenities. It means lively squares, main streets and mixed-use neighbourhoods that invite and engage gatherings and social interaction.

It also means we need to embrace new technology. Technology is driving virtual work and more online retail shopping. At the same time, we are transitioning from big box retail and the use of cars for work and leisure.

The use of automated vehicles or AVs is a good example. A pilot program for automated vehicles was just introduced in West Rouge and Whitby by Metrolinx.

These technology realities are no different than those experienced by the music, photography and movie industries.

They will occur; it's happening now. It's global in scope, and it's happening fast. Our goal is to ensure we integrate these trends into our Official Plan update's bold vision for the city.

The plan comes with very high expectations for Richmond Hill, as captured through our vision statement:

By 2041, the City of Richmond Hill will be the centrepiece of York Region and one of the most prominent, complete communities in the GTA.

Richmond Hill Centre

As I mentioned we are close to completing our important secondary plan for Richmond Hill Centre. The draft secondary plan was released just two weeks ago for public review and public consultation.

Richmond Hill Centre will be our new downtown, and served by the new Yonge North Subway Extension. In fact, the new subway extension is expected to accommodate over 94,000 riders daily.

I cannot begin to tell you how excited I am about these two developments for our city. It has been a vision of mine since 1997 as a rookie Councillor, and I would like you to join me as we begin to imagine and prepare for our amazing future.

The Yonge North Subway Extension, a \$5.8 billion project, is a key part of that future. It truly demonstrates the power of partnership among all three levels of government.

This extension will provide two subway stops in Richmond Hill. One at High Tech Road and another at Bridge Street.

High Tech station will sit in the heart of our new downtown—Richmond Hill Centre.

This centre will generate up to 40,000 new jobs and house 23,000 new residential units.

High Tech station will truly be our Union Station of the north serving as a central hub for five different transit modes:

- o VIVA
- o YRT
- o Subway
- o GO Transit
- o And the future 407 transitway.

This is a game changer for our city, and it will all happen in the next eight years.

It is possible the amount of new development in Richmond Hill Centre will exceed the value of the \$5.8 billion subway by as much as 10 times, or \$58 billion of investment into our city. This is unprecedented anywhere in the GTA and Canada within this timeframe.

And it is all happening here in our city right now.

In fact, I am thrilled to be able to share an exciting announcement with you today. You are the first public audience to hear this news, and the City of Richmond Hill will be issuing a media release immediately following my remarks.

A new major business is locating in Richmond Hill. Planning for this has been in the works for over a year, but shovels are in the ground as I speak.

I am thrilled to announce that Amazon, the fourth largest corporation in the world, is locating, and now building, a new delivery station in Richmond Hill. This will be a 20,800 square metre facility expected to bring 400 new jobs to the city, including over 200 full-time positions, and is targeted to open in early 2023.

Amazon is committed to fully transitioning its fleet in Richmond Hill to electric vehicles by 2030, supporting our strategic priority to balance growth and green.

I know this is only the beginning of number of exciting developments to follow in the city, especially as we begin development of the new Richmond Hill Centre. Richmond Hill Centre will be a national showpiece for contemporary urban design.

Richmond Hill: Imagine our future

Imagine Yonge Street lined with cafes, retail boutiques, green spaces, parks, public gathering and cultural spaces, bicycle corridors and a complete walkable experience.

Imagine the opportunities for tourism and economic development with urban amenities far beyond Front Street and Yorkville.

Imagine seamless transportation, transit, pedestrian and bicycle links connecting all our parks, trails, lakes and attractions.

Imagine the incentive for knowledge industries to locate in Richmond Hill—attracting some of the top talent in the country.

Imagine a diverse housing community that provides expanded opportunities for affordable housing and a vibrant mixed-used neighbourhood.

All these things are more than imagination.

They are going to happen ... and they will happen within 10 years.

In closing, I want to leave you with one last thought and my belief.

I believe that when all these plans and developments unfold, Richmond Hill will rise to a position of preeminence in the GTA and Canada.

It will also provide the answer to my first question to you today.

What makes a great city? The answer to that question, everyone, is quite simple.

When everything I have talked about today comes together, all you will need to do is look at Richmond Hill.

Thank you.