




SM4RT LIVING

THE YORK REGION WASTE MANAGEMENT MASTER PLAN

2026 to 2030



The most
cost-effective way
to manage waste is
to avoid creating it.

Contents

Introduction	4
Strong achievements, sweeping changes and new challenges	7
The path to a greener future	7
Achievements, learnings and what lies ahead	8
Public libraries expand offerings to help build the circular economy	10
Food and farming: the original circular economy	11
Waste tonnage returning to longer-term trend	12
Moving forward, waste management faces a range of challenges	13
Leveraging our momentum (2026 to 2030)	15
Successfully navigate legislative changes	17
Use resources and infrastructure strategically	18
Giving residents better access to depot services	23
Innovative approach will turn organic waste into biofuel	26
Advance the circular economy	28
Drop in avoidable food waste suggests more meals being prepared at home	31
Implementation timetable for new actions	32
Monitoring and measuring progress	32
Guiding York Region to a more sustainable future	34



Introduction

The SM4RT Living vision and objectives

Visionary goal

A world in which nothing goes to waste

Objective 1

Successfully navigate legislative changes

Objective 2

Use resources and infrastructure strategically

Objective 3

Advance the circular economy

The Regional Municipality of York is strongly committed to reducing costs and environmental impacts of its waste management system, directly and through partnerships by:

- **Reducing** waste generation
- **Reusing** items that would otherwise be discarded
- **Recycling** as many materials as possible into new products
- **Recovering** energy from waste that cannot be managed in other ways

These “4Rs” acted as inspiration for the name of the Region’s waste management plan, the ‘SM4RT Living Plan’. First approved by York Regional Council in 2013, the SM4RT Living Plan sets an aspirational vision of “a world in which nothing goes to waste” and outlines how the Region is working toward achieving that goal.

A key foundation of the SM4RT Living Plan is the circular economy, a model being embraced across Canada and around the world. The circular economy shifts thinking from a single-use mindset to a circular one. Products are designed so they can be repaired, reused and refurbished, keeping them in use for the longest time possible. Resources are recovered and recycled. Food waste is minimized and what cannot be avoided is composted and returned to the earth. Ultimately, nothing goes to waste.

The circular economy is aligned with the Region’s approach that the most cost-effective way to manage waste is to avoid creating it. For both financial and environmental sustainability, the SM4RT Living Plan strongly encourages practices that help households reduce the amount of waste they put out at the curb or drop off at a waste depot.

The SM4RT Living Plan is based on a 25-year horizon and is updated every five years to track progress, incorporate learnings, adapt to change and set objectives and actions for the next five years. This 2025 update extends the Plan's horizon to 2050.

York Regional Council sets priorities over each four-year term through the Strategic Plan, aligned with the Vision's four areas of focus: **Sustainable Environment, Economic Vitality, Healthy Communities and Good Government**. The SM4RT Living Plan supports all four areas of focus.



Reducing and managing waste responsibly is a cornerstone of the **Sustainable Environment** goal. Without careful management, waste disposal can be a major source of pollution.



SM4RT Living's focus on the circular economy supports **Economic Vitality** by opening the door to new activities, connections and cost savings within local economies. This reduces dependence on imported resources, encourages local production and reduces business-related waste.



Good waste management practices reduce public health risks and support the goal of **Healthy Communities**. Buying local produce, meal planning, preparing meals from scratch and growing food are all well recognized for their health benefits. The personal connections created by SM4RT Living initiatives like Repair Cafés also help give participants a stronger sense of community.



SM4RT Living exemplifies **Good Government** by focusing on reducing waste from the start, which helps reduce the rising costs of processing waste.

Strong achievements, sweeping changes and new challenges

Over the past five years, the Region has consistently ranked among the top municipalities in Ontario for the percentage of waste diverted from landfill and is an established leader in the sector.

Since the 2020 update, the waste management sector has seen sweeping changes from local to global levels. Lockdowns during the COVID-19 pandemic shifted waste tonnage from private sector management to municipalities. At the same time, the Ontario government has been advancing efforts to make producers fully responsible for the Blue Box and other diversion programs.

After pandemic-related disruptions, the weight of waste and green bin organics produced per resident has dropped back down to pre-pandemic levels. The related expenses continue to rise as tonnages are increasing with population growth and the cost to process waste is also steadily increasing.

The path to a greener future

This updated plan details:



Accomplishments and lessons of the SM4RT Living Plan's past five years, how they informed this update, a look at the increasingly complex waste management landscape and growing resident needs that lie ahead (Page 8)



How York Region will build on the momentum of past successes and navigate the new landscape to continue to provide leading-edge programs and services and a resilient, stable infrastructure (Page 15)



Achievements, learnings and what lies ahead

Thank you York Region local cities, towns and community partners for your efforts in implementing the SM4RT Living Plan and the valuable insights into improvements, which helped shape this update.

From 2020 to 2024, York Region advanced key SM4RT Living actions under three objectives approved in the last update to the waste management master plan:

OBJECTIVE 1

Successfully navigate legislative changes

- In collaboration with local cities and towns, the Region navigated the path set out by provincial legislation to make producers responsible for collecting and managing blue box materials across Ontario. This included making decisions about collection contracts, managing ineligible sources and informing residents about upcoming changes. The producer-led program begins on January 1, 2026
- York Region has been the leader in the Large Urban category of the province-wide Datacall diversion rate every year since 2012 and ranked first overall in 2016 and 2022. The Datacall rate excludes waste used to generate energy. With the Blue Box program moving to full producer responsibility, the Datacall process, which verified diversion rates and ranked municipalities, ended with the 2023 submission

OBJECTIVE 2

Use resources and infrastructure strategically

- Waste management consistently exceeds York Regional Council's 2013 goal of diverting 90% of waste from landfill (includes waste used to generate energy)
- Based on the recommendation of the previous SM4RT Living Plan update, staff successfully procured a long-term solution for using organic waste to generate biofuel. See details on page 26
- Depots remained open throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Waste depots provided a much-needed service during storms and emergency events by allowing free drop-off of yard waste and debris. Customer service ratings reflected a high level of satisfaction with the depots' performance

OBJECTIVE 3

Advance the circular economy

- From 2020 to 2024, York Region offered approximately 1,000 backyard composters per year at a discounted price to residents. Composters consistently sold out in days
- The Region spent less than a dollar per household per year to deliver circular economy programming through more than 35 partners, driving reduction and reuse by engaging residents through activities such as bike refurbishment workshops, curbside giveaway days, food waste reduction workshops, Lenderies, Repair Café events and more

Public libraries expand offerings to help build the circular economy

It may be called a Lendery or Library of Things. Whatever the name, it's a great idea.

A Lendery is a library of things where you sign out things rather than books. Things you need at the moment but don't need to own.

They grew from the goal of encouraging the reuse of items – rather than residents tossing away power tools or household items that were no longer needed, they could be put to work helping others.

Who better to partner with than local libraries? A trusted community resource with systems in place for lending.

The Markham Public Library was the first location. Working together, the library and the Region surveyed patrons on what items they might use and why they might use them - to save money, reduce environmental impact or achieve other goals.

Opening just prior to the pandemic, the Markham Public Library Lendery quickly proved successful, despite the disruption caused by COVID-19. Offerings have been expanded to include a bicycle and toy lending library and dedicated "makerspaces" offering access to tools and technologies for "Do It Yourself" (DIY) projects and collaboration.

Since then, the Region has partnered with additional local libraries in Newmarket, Vaughan and most recently Richmond Hill.

The program is so popular that libraries in the towns of Aurora, East Gwillimbury, Georgina, King and Whitchurch-Stouffville have created their own Library of Things in York Region.

ON AVERAGE, EACH LIBRARY HAS ABOUT 120 DIFFERENT ITEMS AVAILABLE

In 2024, these items were checked out or renewed almost 4,000 times. Vaughan Public Library's most popular item is a carpet cleaner. In Newmarket, board games are the most popular.

Public reaction has been enthusiastic: "Such a great idea that the library carries such amazing tools and equipment..." said one patron. "I think it's a fantastic thing the library is doing to help reduce waste and cost to members," said another.



THE
LENDERY

A LIBRARY OF THINGS

Food and farming: the original circular economy

Whether it's leaves and garden clippings in a backyard composter turning into compost or a cover crop preventing erosion on a 200-acre farm, food production is the original circular economy and one that many residents are rediscovering with the help of York Region partnerships.

Working with the York Region Food Network and local libraries, the Region supports initiatives like the Good Food Challenge that shows local community members, especially young families, not just how to prevent food waste, but how they can support local farmers and even grow and produce some of their own food. By leveraging local library systems, the program can finetune its offerings to local community needs.

The 2024 Good Food Challenge, which drew close to 4,000 participants, featured a wide range of activities including culinary workshops, seed giveaways, vermicomposting and soil-arium workshops (where kids can watch organics turn into compost on the windowsill). York Region Food Network staff have the skills, equipment and experience to develop and delivery these programs, making them a valuable strategic partner.

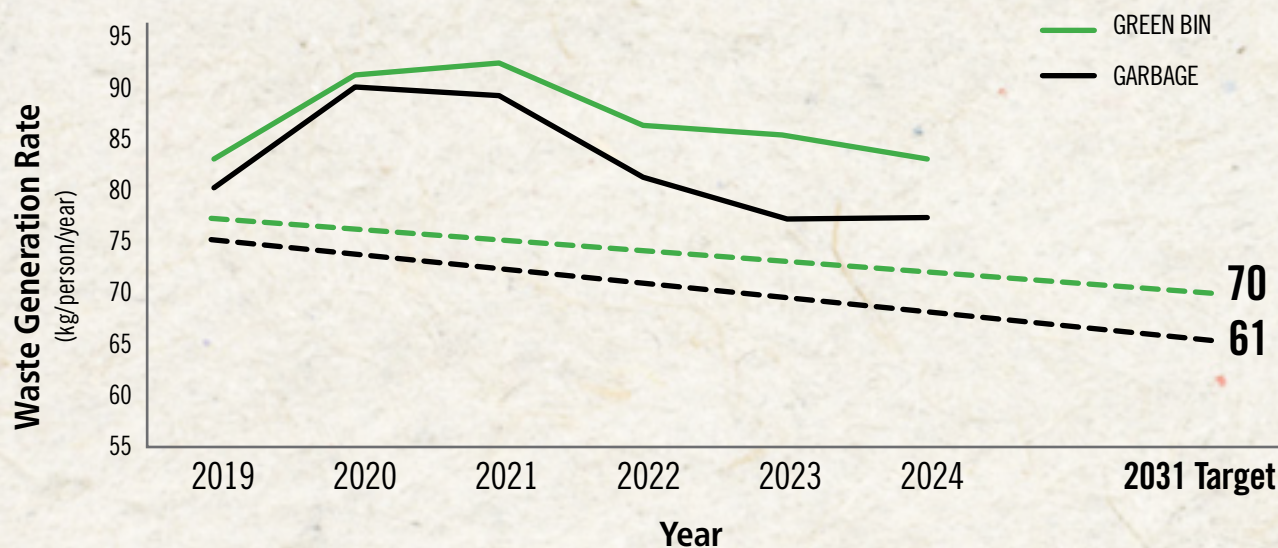
Their activities include running community gardens, providing breakfasts and fresh food markets, building cross-cultural links through food and advocating for greater food security and equity. Through the long-standing partnership with York Region, they have also built a strong commitment to reducing food waste and practicing circular economy activities throughout their operations.

**THE GOOD FOOD
CHALLENGE DREW
CLOSE TO 4000
PARTICIPANTS IN 2024**

Waste tonnage returning to longer-term trend

These achievements came against a backdrop of unprecedented challenges. In early 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic closed most workplaces and many people shifted to working from home. This increased municipal waste tonnage as workplace waste is typically managed by the private sector. Home delivery of food and other products became much more common, adding more food packaging to waste streams.

York Region Residential Curbside Waste Generation Rate



By 2023, more people were returning to the office and, as the graph above shows, waste generation began returning to pre-pandemic trends. The waste management sector continues to assess the long-term impacts of the pandemic.

Moving forward, waste management faces a range of challenges

Like other Ontario municipalities, York Region faces an increasingly challenging waste management landscape:

Rising costs

Contracted services, trucking of waste, ongoing operations and construction projects are all becoming far more costly and less competitive. Contracting is a growing concern, representing more than three-quarters of the Region's waste management operating budget and for some services, the pool of contractors is very limited. Between 2017 and 2024, the Region saw waste contract costs go up by 37% while consumer inflation in the Toronto area increased by 23%.

Blue Box transition

While preparation for the Blue Box transition to extended producer responsibility is well underway, availability of timely information for residents is an ongoing challenge. [Circular Materials](#), the Producer Responsibility Organizations (PRO) taking over the program, has indicated that key details such as new materials accepted, curbside set-out and collection container changes will be shared in October 2025. This presents a tight window for the Region and its local cities and towns to ensure residents are properly informed and ready to participate starting January 1, 2026. Additionally, the Province made significant amendments to the Blue Box regulation in September 2025, adding further complexity to planning efforts.

With producers taking on responsibility for the Blue Box program, which represents a major share of diverted waste, York Region will be challenged to achieve 90% or higher diversion from landfill – a longstanding Regional target. The target will be re-visited with Regional Council's input, with the update of the Corporate Strategic Plan during the next council term.

Tracking the diversion rate will be further complicated by the end of the province-wide Datacall process, which provided municipal councils and residents with a clear performance measure and allowed comparison with other municipalities.



The Blue Box program transition also prompted consideration about the best use of municipally-owned facilities such as the Region's Material Recovery Facility in the Town of East Gwillimbury, where blue box materials are sorted. This is part of a larger strategic discussion to optimize the balance between contracted services and in-house delivery and asset ownership.

Environmental concerns

Climate change is adding to waste streams; for example, more yard waste is generated as a result of ice and wind storms, bringing urgency to efforts to lower greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions and plan how to adapt to impacts.

Ontario is running out of places to dispose of residual waste, with projections indicating that the province's landfills could reach capacity as early as 2028. While the Region has consistently diverted more than 90% of waste from landfill for many years, what remains must be trucked to disposal sites. These locations are in Ontario but as far as 480 kilometres away from the Region.

York Region is also experiencing demographic changes, increased urbanization, evolving market trends and emerging social trends. These factors are reshaping service needs and presenting new opportunities for innovation.

An aging population, greater reliance on public transit instead of private vehicles and the arrival of newcomers from outside Canada are creating mobility, access and communication challenges at the Region's waste depots originally designed for drive-thru drop off

Many residents are increasingly interested in taking part in the circular economy, particularly by developing skills like home cooking, gardening and household repairs. This likely reflects interest in saving money as well as a desire to protect the environment. Delivering programs to meet residents' interests and advance the circular economy will involve strengthening existing partnerships to build capacity

A limited competitive market for procuring contracted waste management services and rising inflation are creating uncertainty around service continuity and increasing cost pressures. Shifting the Region's approach toward infrastructure investment and service delivery is needed to mitigate these risks and promote cost efficiencies

All these factors helped shape this update to the SM4RT Living Plan. The Region also considered the needs and preferences of our local cities and towns, which face their own waste management challenges as they grow and change.



Leveraging our momentum (2026 to 2030)

Given York Region's achievements and challenges facing waste management, the SM4RT Living Plan's focus over the next five years (2026 to 2030) will be on three key areas:



Continuing to monitor and manage the impacts of extended producer responsibility



Making sound decisions around infrastructure investments and service delivery including evolving customer experience at depots

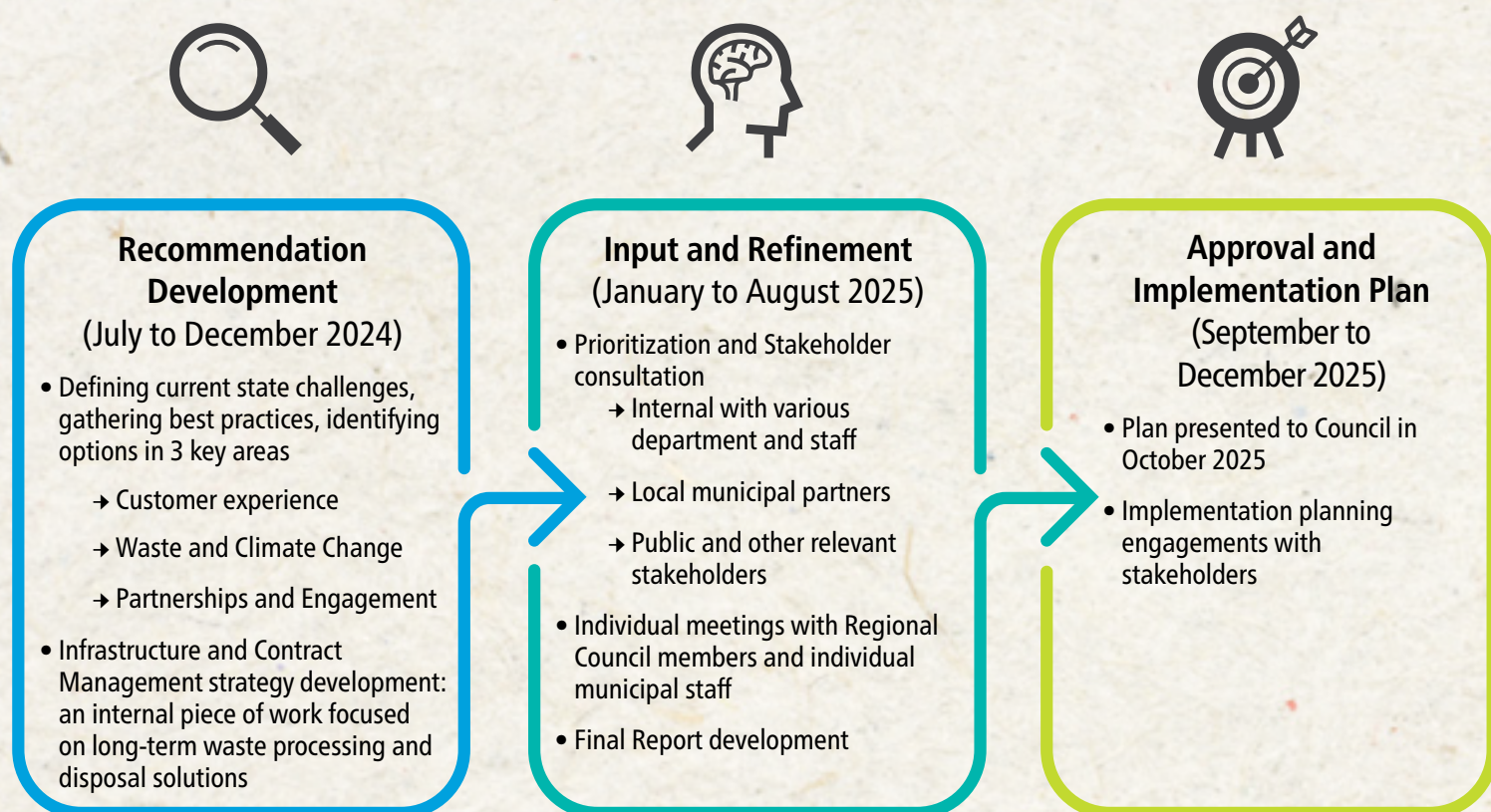


Promoting circular thinking, through strengthened partnerships and community engagement



In developing actions in these areas, the Region undertook an in-depth consultation process. The high-level phases are shown in the diagram below. In the Recommendation Development phase, activities included interviews with partners, Regional staff, contractor staff and customers at the waste depots. The Input and Refinement phase, testing potential recommendations around customer experience and partnerships, involved focus groups with seniors and people without cars, workshops with partners, local cities and towns, internal Regional teams and in-person surveys at events and transit hubs.

Process: Summary



The foundation underlying planned actions in all areas will be a detailed framework to measure performance and progress.

OBJECTIVE 1

Successfully navigate legislative changes

Producers become fully responsible for operating and funding the Blue Box program in York Region as of January 1, 2026. Producer-led programs have been in place for other types of products such as electronic waste, light bulbs and tubes, tires and some types of household hazardous waste for several years. This framework of extended producer responsibility has and will continue to impact waste management in the Region. While municipalities are supportive of this approach in principle, there are some implications to consider with the change:

Continuing advocacy needed

Throughout the Blue Box program transition, the Region has been working with other municipalities to advocate for strong regulations, targets and enforcement mechanisms to ensure producers meet their full responsibilities. Producers, however, continue to pressure the provincial government to soften these requirements. The Region will continue to lead municipal advocacy to ensure producer-led programs achieve environmental targets.

Exclusion of small businesses, places of worship and municipal buildings and facilities from the Blue Box regulation has put recycling programs for these locations at risk. A provincial policy framework to drive waste diversion from the industrial, commercial and institutional sector is desperately needed, as noted by the [Auditor General](#) of Ontario.

Like other municipalities, the Region is concerned about packaging materials and other items that are presented to the public as being suitable for adding to the green bin, when in fact they cannot be processed easily into compost.

Impacts to depot programs

The Region will continue to provide collection programs at its waste depots for producer responsibility items such as tires, batteries, electronics (including lights) and other hazardous and special products. These programs are costly, but needed to manage the more costly risk of residents illegally dumping or discarding these items in the garbage. As these are products designated as producer responsibility, producers should fully cover the related costs.

The Region, like many municipalities, is underfunded for hazardous and special products management. Only about 50% of the hazardous waste collected is designated under the regulation. Funding from Producer Responsibility Organizations (PROs) is covering a decreasing share of rising operational costs. The operational cost has seen an increase upward of 30% over the past few years.

While the regulations aim to promote competition, the limited number of PROs, insufficient targets, and their reluctance to engage in formal procurement processes have created challenges. This has increased administrative complexity and costs for the Region. The Region will continue to negotiate with producer organizations to pay the Region's costs to collect designated hazardous products at depots.

NEW ACTIONS

1.1. Adjust waste audit categories to track and report on designated materials in the garbage stream

OBJECTIVE 2

Use resources and infrastructure strategically

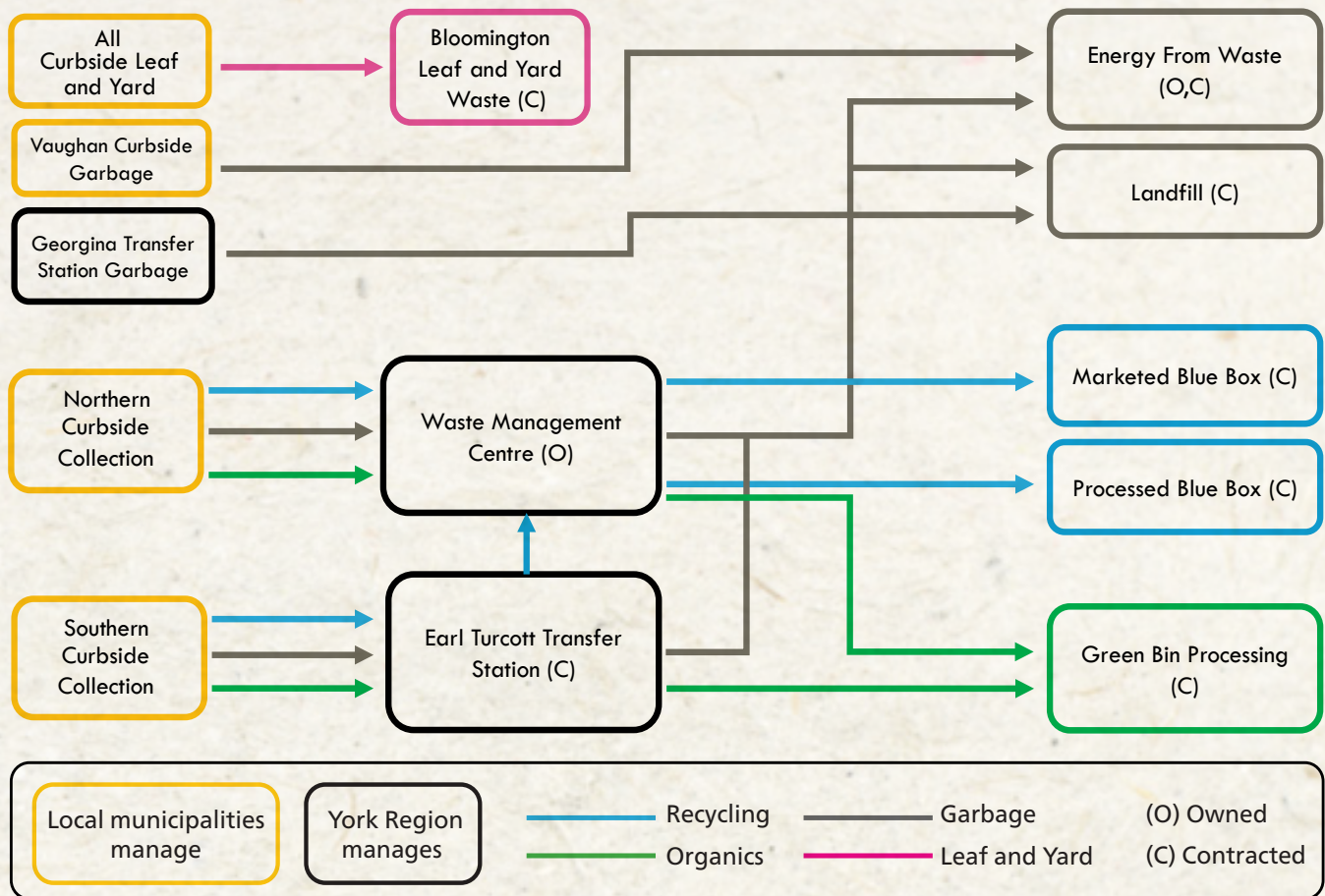
The review process examined the Region's overall operations and asset portfolio to ensure the right balance between Regional assets and services and those provided by outside contractors.

The overview of the Region's current waste management system, illustrated on the next page, explains:

- York Region owns the York Region Waste Management Centre, located in the Town of East Gwillimbury and operated by a contractor. This facility contains a transfer station as well as Materials Recovery Facility, equipment that processes blue box materials
- The same contractor owns, operates and manages the other transfer station in the Region, located in the City of Markham
- Both transfer stations receive green bin organics which are then sent to processing facilities. Some of these facilities are several hundred kilometres away. Under the new contract for anaerobic processing, transport distances will be much shorter
- The Materials Recovery Facility receives and sorts blue box recyclables from both transfer stations and the waste depots
- The Durham York Energy Centre, which the Region co-owns with the Regional Municipality of Durham, along with two contracted energy-from-waste facilities in the City of Brampton and Niagara Falls, New York, receive residual waste
- The small portion of waste that cannot be recycled, composted or recovered as energy is sent to landfill



Waste Management System Overview



These arrangements have given rise to numerous management and operating contracts and agreements for the various waste streams. As noted earlier, the cost of contracted services has risen faster than inflation in recent years and the availability of contractors for some services is very limited. The approach to procuring services, particularly to increase competition among service providers, was therefore an important consideration in this update.

In addition, the Region's ownership of infrastructure needed for waste management is limited. This creates uncertainty as local cities and towns drop off curbside collected waste to third-party contracted transfer stations. As contracts change, routes and drop off locations could also change.

As part of a strategic approach to balancing and enhancing its overall asset portfolio while looking at Region-wide waste management needs, the Region explored the impact of the Blue Box program transition on its Material Recovery Facility which it will no longer need after December 31, 2025:

The Region initially published a request for expressions of market interest in leasing the Material Recovery Facility and continuing to operate it under contract on a short-term basis. Respondents' proposals were noncommittal due to uncertainty around future demand for processing services under the new system.

As this work was being carried out, a scan of municipalities similar to the Region showed most own their own transfer stations and peers in the Greater Toronto Area typically use more than two transfer stations. After thoroughly evaluating options, the Region will decommission the Material Recovery Facility equipment, making way for new uses that meet future needs. Options considered included: a new/expanded transfer station and a leaf and yard waste facility (the current contract for yard and leaf processing expires in 2030).

Southern local municipalities expressed a need for greater certainty around curbside waste transfer locations in their part of the Region. This is a special concern for them because they generate the bulk of waste in the Region and are working to meet ambitious provincial housing targets. With growth and intensification, longer travel times will increase their costs. A further factor is the 2031 expiry date of the current contract for the southern transfer station which the Region does not own.



NEW ACTIONS

- 2.1. Establish a leaf and yard waste facility on the vacant Region-owned property next to the existing Waste Management Centre, where the Material Recovery Facility is currently located
- 2.2. Build a new Region-owned waste transfer station in southern York Region to ensure greater certainty and capacity and reduce travel time risks
- 2.3. Procure the balance of waste transfer capacity required from the private sector

York Region's leaf and yard waste is currently managed at a private facility, under contract expiring in 2030 without renewal options. The facility receives all curbside deliveries directly from local cities and towns and is the only privately-owned, large-scale leaf and yard waste processing facility in the Region. By 2050, the Region is estimated to manage over 66,000 tonnes of leaf and yard waste annually. Scans of other Ontario municipalities in the Greater Golden Horseshoe region showed leaf and yard waste processing costs substantially lower than York Region's current pricing. This price difference is likely driven by the lack of a competitive market for private processing in the York Region area given the length of our current contract (over 20 years).

Building a new leaf and yard waste facility next to the Waste Management Centre would:

- Attract more competition from service providers, as firms would not have to incur the risk and complexity of financing and constructing the facility
- Provide certainty to the leaf and yard waste drop-off location for local municipalities
- Provide direct benefits to residents by offering compost sales, giveaway events and public drop-off at the site
- Efficiently leverage existing assets including a weigh scale house and space both to store collected materials at the facility and compost it on the adjacent property
- Allow the Region to retain the value associated with the capital investment

Building a new Region-owned waste transfer station in southern York Region would:

- Mitigate the risk of higher collection costs for local municipalities by providing certainty about transfer station location and reducing travel time risk
- Widen the field of potential service providers for operating the facility
- Improve logistical control and provide critical infrastructure redundancy and resiliency
- Allow the Region to retain the value associated with the capital investment

In addition, expanding the existing transfer station at the Waste Management Centre provides more operational flexibility and ensures adequate capacity as the Region's communities grow.

Given the timelines to develop this solution as well as uncertain market conditions, the Region will procure the balance of needed waste transfer capacity through contracting. Infrastructure recommendations could be updated and reviewed as part of future budget processes, as required.

The Region expects to save roughly \$13 million in operating costs over 10 years through these changes as compared to the status quo, which relies on private-sector sites for leaf and yard waste and waste transfer in the southern municipalities.

Planning for residual waste management

The review and update also assessed options for acquiring more capacity for managing residual waste through energy from waste facilities within or near the Region. Currently there are two priority options the Region can pursue for securing additional capacity to meet long-term needs and allow transition away from shipping any waste across the border. The Region co-owns the Durham York Energy Centre with Durham Region in the Municipality of Clarington, Ontario. This facility was constructed with some oversized components to make future expansion easier, however it would still require regulatory approvals and would have to be driven by Durham Region with support from the host community of the Municipality of Clarington. Additionally, the Region has a contract with two private service providers, one in Brampton and one in New York state. These arrangements allow the Region to maintain the diversion from landfill rate above 90%. The facility located in the City of Brampton is planning an expansion. While these two priority options are available to the Region, alternative long term options in the future could include the development of a local energy-from-waste facility, which could take 10 to 15 years to establish. Given the length of time to site, secure permitting and construct this type of facility, staff will research and explore this further in the next five years.

NEW ACTIONS

- 2.4. Explore options to expand energy from waste capacity through expanding the existing capacity at Durham York Energy Centre and/or procuring/extending contracts with other private facilities



Giving residents better access to depot services

Since local cities and towns collect curbside waste, residents' main direct contact with York Region is through its five waste depots. The depots allow residents to drop off bulky items, electronics, hazardous products and large quantities of other materials not easily or regularly collected at the curb.

An external analysis conducted for this update identified the depots' key strengths:

An exceptionally high standard of maintenance

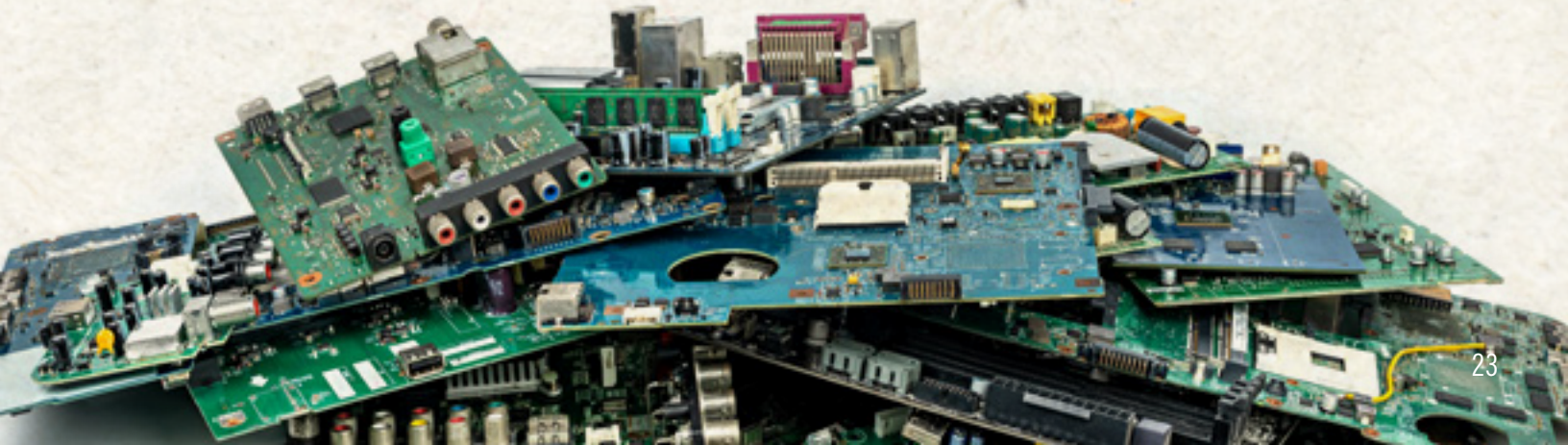
Residents who use the depots note that they are consistently clean, well-organized and efficient. Bins are regularly emptied to prevent overflow.

Knowledgeable staff

Customers consistently praise the knowledge and professionalism of both Region and contracted staff at the depots and staff responding through Access York. Staff expertise in explaining proper waste disposal procedures and answering service-related questions was frequently cited in resident feedback.

Digital tools

Several platforms provide convenient, self-service options for residents that also support efficient delivery of services. The Region's website offers detailed and up-to-date guidance including the [Bindicator](#) tool that tells residents how and where to dispose of different waste materials. To help reduce wait times at three of the busiest depots, the Region provides a live camera feed, updated every three minutes, showing any traffic lined up at entrances.



Improving customer experience

- Some customers reported inconsistent information from the website, waste depots and Access York staff
- During peak periods, such as during seasonal cleanups and on weekends, operating demands meant staff were less available to provide one-on-one support
- Traffic build-up at entry, payment and disposal areas slowed access at busy times
- Customers unfamiliar with depot procedures sometimes took longer to navigate the sites, slowing overall flow
- Residents without vehicles or with mobility limitations reported challenges in reaching or navigating the sites
- Some residents had difficulty understanding guidance because it was provided only in English

Enhancing clarity and user-friendliness of digital tools

- Some users found the [Bindicator](#) tool difficult to use, as certain items were not easily searchable and required multiple attempts to find the right disposal method
- A few customers reported that [Bindicator](#) results did not always align with in-person depot instructions



Other research examined factors such as drive times to depots, which identified pockets of King Township and Town of Georgina outside of the 20 to 30 minute standard for convenient depot access. Other considerations are impacts of more households relying on public transit and, in line with concerns expressed by customers themselves, the expected growth in age-related strength and mobility challenges to unload material.

The review and update also compared the Region's circular economy programs at depots, including bike repair, textile donation, cooking oil, concrete, drywall and wood recycling against those of other leading communities. Results noted that the Region has a robust set of programs to support community recycling and reuse however, in recent years, some programs have faced challenges due to funding limitations, market shifts and rising costs. This uncertainty calls for the Region to adopt a flexible approach to modify, add or remove programs based on customer demand, audit findings, market data and the availability of partners or vendors to maintain service standards. The Region will continue to monitor and assess trends such as emerging markets and customer needs and adjust programming in line with the objectives and actions of the SM4RT Living Plan, exploring revenue recovery and entering into agreements with community organizations or service providers, as the context dictates.

NEW ACTIONS

- 2.5. Piloting an appointment-based service so staff can help unload heavy and/or bulky items for residents with limited mobility and/or strength
- 2.6. Piloting events to collect household hazardous waste from underserved areas in partnership with local cities and towns and producer organizations



Innovative approach will turn organic waste into biofuel

York Region has acted on its longstanding goal of moving to anaerobic processing for organic waste, such as discarded food. The process differs from traditional aerobic processing by taking place in a closed vessel in the absence of oxygen, which allows gases from digestion to be captured as renewable natural gas, also known as biofuel. This process minimizes odours and reduces trucking distances as facilities can be built in urban areas.



Convertus Group, which is headquartered in London, Ontario, was the successful bidder. The new facility in the Town of East Gwillimbury, expected to be in operation by 2027, will be Ontario's first large-scale biofuel facility to integrate liquid carbon dioxide capture technology. Under the Convertus contract, it will process up to 140,000 tonnes of green bin material from York Region each year, exceeding the Region's current demand of slightly over 100,000 tonnes. The facility is expected to meet the Region's needs to 2047.

OBJECTIVE 3

Advance the circular economy

Regional partnerships with community organizations are key to inspiring change. These groups often have close ties with residents, expertise in unique areas such as food skills, repair and upcycling, and facilities or equipment needed for hands-on learning. York Region's Good Food Challenge described on page 11, is one example of how a long-standing partnership has supported the development and expansion of a successful program more effectively than the Region working in isolation.

Through the SM4RT Living Plan, the Region has tested and piloted a number of circular economy programs with its partners. While many programs were paused from 2020 to 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, most programs have been successfully relaunched and expanded.

Others have remained on hold or been reduced due to resource limitations. In 2025, for example, one of the cycling program partners was no longer able to take part in the Recycle to Ride program due to lack of funding. This underscores the need to build a robust network of partners to support collaboration and long-term sustainability.

These challenges and several other factors, including shifts in municipal waste responsibilities, changing demographics and new economic and social challenges, called for changes in programming approaches.

With that in mind, the Region consulted with 22 community organizations, including many that have worked with the Region or received funding from the Circular Economy Initiatives Fund (CEIF). The team also engaged local municipal staff and reviewed best practices for community partnerships from leading communities and internal Regional teams to gather insights and refine programs.

Some common themes we heard from this consultation process included the challenge of launching, delivering and evaluating a project in the one-year timeframe currently offered through the CEIF program. Many felt that projects would have a better impact with a longer term that allows time to establish partnerships, engage new audiences and evaluate and improve programming. This was especially true of organizations that did not previously operate in the Region. Multi-year commitments also make it easier for organizations to attract and retain staff.





Another key theme was the need for building connections between organizations and municipal staff. Many expressed a desire to learn from each other, discuss common challenges and find solutions that address multiple priorities.

Informed by the research and consultation outcomes, the Region will continue to build partnerships and capacity with community organizations, including funding long-term collaborative agreements to support innovative, inclusive, cost-effective food waste reduction and reuse/repair programming.

Programming going forward will also integrate more networking and data sharing between the Region, local cities and towns and community organizations to enable peer to peer learning, new collaborations and evaluation of impacts. Cross-departmental collaboration will also be prioritized to create synergies around the circular economy, food security, local food, affordability and healthy communities.

The work with community organizations merged with direct outreach to York Region residents and businesses. Between October 2023 and July 2025, the Region engaged these groups to assess their level of knowledge and get a sense of how well their current activities align with the circular mindset.

Residents who responded said they are willing to learn more and do more to benefit the environment and their children, and are looking for more guidance on how circular thinking helps reduce waste and save money on a day-to-day basis:

Over half (56%) of respondents indicated they know what the term “circular economy” means, but many are uncertain or unaware of what circular economy services are available in the Region

Almost two-thirds said they were already taking actions identified as “circular” without realizing the linkage to the term “circular economy”

Over 90% were familiar with at least one of York Region’s waste management programs, but not always in terms of the circular economy

Additionally, the Region conducted public surveys as part of the review and update consultation process to engage specific audience and gauge their awareness on the Region’s efforts for circular economy programming. The survey reflected:

Over 80% of respondents expressed confidence in their knowledge of proper recycling and reuse practices

Over 43% reported participating in any waste reduction, reuse or repair initiatives within their community

Educational programs, especially those targeting children and communities, were frequently suggested, with a strong emphasis on food waste reduction

Respondents showed strong interest in understanding what happens to waste after collection



Feedback indicated more public education would be helpful and that York Region should increase awareness and strengthen partnerships to better share information more widely with the community.

Outreach efforts also focused on gathering information from circular economy leaders in the business community. About three-quarters of respondents considered themselves active in circular economy initiatives. For example, just over half already have a relationship with another organization to repurpose surplus materials. Acknowledging that circular actions can both save money and advance sustainability goals, a strong majority added that they would like to be more aware of what more they can do. Their involvement provided the Region with valuable insights into how circular economy activities can benefit the broader business community.

NEW ACTIONS

Actions in this area are aimed at continuing to build on these findings and move ahead on the Circular Economy Roadmap by:

- 3.1. Updating Circular Economy Initiatives Fund to provide up to two years instead of one, with a preference for collaborative programs, focused on reducing food waste or increasing local reuse/repair capacity
- 3.2. Carrying out market research and working with local cities and towns to develop effective campaigns aimed at inspiring positive change in such priority areas as repair, food waste reduction and green bin participation

Drop in avoidable food waste suggests more meals being prepared at home

York Region waste management audits showed that avoidable food waste in the green bin in 2024 was at its lowest level since 2020. “Avoidable” waste is food that has spoiled when it could have been consumed. On the other hand, unavoidable food waste related to cleaning, peeling and trimming food items increased by nearly 10% from the previous year.

These figures suggest residents are preparing more meals at home. The reasons likely include inflation, a slower economy and uncertainty around trade with the U.S., all of which are making consumers more mindful of the costs of food waste. The Region’s messaging and programs to discourage waste and help people develop home cooking skills may also contribute.

In addition, many employers now offer a hybrid model that allows working from home at least part of the time. While the long-term impacts on waste management aren’t fully yet known, it’s possible this model can also help reduce avoidable food waste by providing opportunities to plan meals in advance, shop for only what you need, cook at home and use up leftovers.

The Region’s figures appear to support these ideas.

Implementation timetable for new actions

	2026	2027	2028	2029	2030
Objective 1: Successfully Navigate Legislative Changes <i>Continue to monitor and manage impacts of extended producer responsibility</i>					
1.1 Track and report on designated materials in garbage	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Objective 2: Use Resources and Infrastructure Strategically <i>Make sound investment and service delivery decisions to ensure cost-effective, flexible infrastructure and programs that meet the future needs of our communities</i>					
2.1 Establish a Region-owned Leaf and Yard Waste Composting Facility	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
2.2 Build a new transfer station in the south	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
2.3 Procure additional private-sector transfer station capacity to meet needs	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
2.4 Consider options to expand energy-from-waste capacity	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
2.5 Pilot an appointment-based service for staff-assisted unloading at depots		✓	✓		
2.6 Pilot hazardous waste collection events for underserved areas	✓	✓	✓		
Objective 3: Advance the Circular Economy <i>Continue to build a circular mindset to reduce waste through collaboration and education</i>					
3.1 Revamp Circular Economy Initiatives Fund	✓	✓			
3.2 Conduct market research and public awareness campaigns	✓		✓		✓

Monitoring and measuring progress

Historically and in line with the aim of SM4RT Living, York Region used the waste diversion rate as its key performance metric. This was calculated and reported in two different ways:

Waste diversion from landfill is the total percentage of waste collected that does not go to landfill. This metric reflects the Region's use of waste to generate energy, and diversion is consistently over 90%

A diversion rate was calculated for the province-wide Datacall process operated by an external organization, the [Resource Productivity and Recovery Authority](#). Although similar to the Region's calculation, this metric did not reflect diversion to generate energy and was lower than the Region's metric. The Region's rate was still among the highest in Ontario



With the transition to extended producer responsibility for the Blue Box program, Ontario municipalities will no longer have access to data on tonnages of recyclables collected and processed. Since blue box materials represented a large share of the material diverted from landfill, municipal diversion rates including the Region's, will decline. In addition, the Datacall program ended with the start of the Blue Box program transition, concluding this province-wide means of benchmarking.

The Region continues to track such measures as diversion from landfill rate, average waste generated for each resident and total tonnages of various waste streams, which remain highly relevant.

Based on research and analysis, metrics to be explored in tracking performance on material flow in the future:

Percentage of designated materials (materials intended to be managed by producers) in garbage

Green bin capture rate: the weight of organic waste collected in the green bin divided by the total weight of organic waste in both the green bin and garbage

Green bin contamination rate: the weight of non-organic materials in the green bin divided by the total weight of material in the green bin

Socio-economic and climate change metrics will also be considered.

Together, these metrics align with the strategic goals of the SM4RT Living Plan, create accountability and will be used to support continuous improvement. Progress will be reported through the Region's annual Waste Management Report.

Guiding York Region to a more sustainable future



Traditionally, waste management started at the end of a process of extracting resources, turning them into consumable products and discarding them.

This linear economy model is not sustainable. Disposing of waste is becoming more and more costly, not just because we are running out of space for landfills, but because other ways of managing it, such as composting food waste, are increasingly expensive. All methods of disposal add to the burden on the natural environment.

This is why the circular economy is emerging as a global trend, embraced globally by cities in countries at all stages of growth.

It is only through a more circular approach, designing products to be reused or reconfigured repeatedly, exploring how to keep the value of resources and taking innovative action to renew nature and our food system, that we can effectively pursue the goal of a world in which nothing going to waste.

Through the SM4RT Living Plan, York Region and our partners commit to developing a more circular economy through reducing waste, reusing and repairing items that would otherwise be discarded, recycling, and recovering as much energy as possible from the waste that remains. Without this commitment, the financial, environmental and social costs of waste management are not sustainable.

While this updated plan addresses the ongoing need for processing waste, it also envisions and actively promotes a future in which the full value of resources is recognized, preserved and protected in a continually renewing economy.



SM4RT LIVING

THE YORK REGION WASTE MANAGEMENT MASTER PLAN

2026 to 2030