



Critical infrastructure such as bridges, buildings, transit, power, water and wastewater systems, and health care facilities are essential to Canadians. However, their safety, serviceability, and durability are at risk if changes in climate conditions are not addressed. Photo: iStock

Incoming “silver tsunami” spurs age-friendly community strategy development in Richmond Hill

By Godwin Chan

Richmond Hill, Ont., is bracing itself for a “silver tsunami.”

Richmond Hill is a city with a population of about 220,000 in the Greater Toronto Area. Seniors aged 65 and over made up 14.6 per cent of the city’s population in 2016.

The 2016 census showed that the population of older adults at 55-plus years, including the seniors, represents about 28 per cent of the total population. By 2021, adults aged 55 and over comprised 32 per cent of the city’s population, in which the seniors’ population aged 65 and over had risen to 17.2 per cent of the total population.

For the first time, the number of seniors outnumbered those who are aged 15 and under. An aging population is seen not only in Richmond Hill, but also across Canada.

In recognition of the silver tsunami, the greying population, council considered a member motion in June 2019 that supports seniors for active living and

delivers accessible age-friendly programs and services. As part of the motion, city staff were directed to look into the feasibility of developing the age-friendly community strategy in Richmond Hill and report back in the first quarter of 2020 with steps to establish a senior advisory committee that includes the active engagement of older adults.

Age-Friendly Communities Framework

The age-friendly communities framework is an evidence-based policy initiative released and promoted by the World Health Organization (WHO). To help create and enhance active living in livable communities for all ages and abilities, in 2007, WHO proposed eight domains:

- outdoor spaces and buildings
- transportation
- housing
- social participation
- respect and social inclusion
- civic participation and employment

- communication and information
 - community support and health services
- The framework has demonstrated benefits, including stimulated economy; improved quality of life; improved access and awareness of health and community services; improved accessibility, walkability, and safety; reduced isolation; and improved inclusion and intergenerational connections.

The Government of Ontario encourages the development of age-friendly communities in local communities. At the 2023 Association of Ontario Municipalities annual conference, the Ministry of Seniors and Accessibility presented a session on the framework, featuring the minister as the speaker.

At present, there are more than 80 age-friendly communities in Ontario undertaking initiatives across eight domains. The provincial recognition list includes the City of Toronto. The emerging examples from cities have shown that municipalities have a role to



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play in promoting the age-friendly communities initiative.

Richmond Hill Experience

Pursuant to the unanimously adopted motion at council, staff undertook a prospective analysis of the growing population of older adults aged 55 and above to assess the changing demographics; review the policies, programs, and services of the city; and conduct a scan of the municipalities in York Region that comprises of Richmond Hill and eight other municipalities for benchmarking purposes.

As next steps, staff prepared an action plan, including a plan for a comprehensive engagement with older adults in the community, applied for the age-friendly community planning grant from the Government of Ontario, developed a term of reference for retaining a consult, established an internal staff committee to guide future work, prepared a business case for budget resource, and sought direction from council regarding the necessary steps to implement the age-friendly communities framework in Richmond Hill.

In November 2020, council approved Strategic Priorities 2020-2022 that encompassed the development of an age-friendly community strategy for Richmond Hill to support the priority in creating a strong sense of belonging.

During the summer of 2021, the city conducted an engagement project to collect information and input from older adults aged 55 and over through online or telephone surveys and focus groups. In addition to posting the consultation methods on the website and social media, the city placed advertisements in English and non-English media to reach out to the diverse population.

The results of the city's community engagement were considered satisfactory with over 800 residents completing the survey online and 60 older adults participating in the focus groups. In addition, almost 300 participated in key stakeholders' interviews, community roundtables, and workshops to provide input.

The survey revealed that other adults preferred being "consulted more on planning, services, and other aspects of the community." Other findings highlighted respondents' issues and interests such as outdoor spaces, challenges at

pedestrian crossings, and preference for an overall government approach to supporting their mental, physical, and social health needs. Housing options for seniors was raised as an area that need attention.

Certain barriers identified by seniors, such as health services, fall outside municipal jurisdictions. The findings of the community needs assessment can be categorized under social, physical, and personal well-being.

Seniors would like to stay engaged not only in social settings, but also in workplaces. For seniors on fixed or low incomes, there is a need for more affordable housing options. Based on this study, seniors seem to be comfortable receiving information or news through electronic media, and generally have access to the internet for communications purposes.

The community needs assessment study provided information for the city to develop the age-friendly community strategy and served as a baseline for benchmarking and future comparisons.

In May 2022, staff presented the consultation findings of the public engagement and prepared the terms of reference for the age-friendly community council, as directed in the original motion. The city's age-friendly community strategy was completed in four stages (see Figure 1):

Phase 1: Getting Started (November to December 2022) – Project start-up, research and engagement plan, and information and data collection.

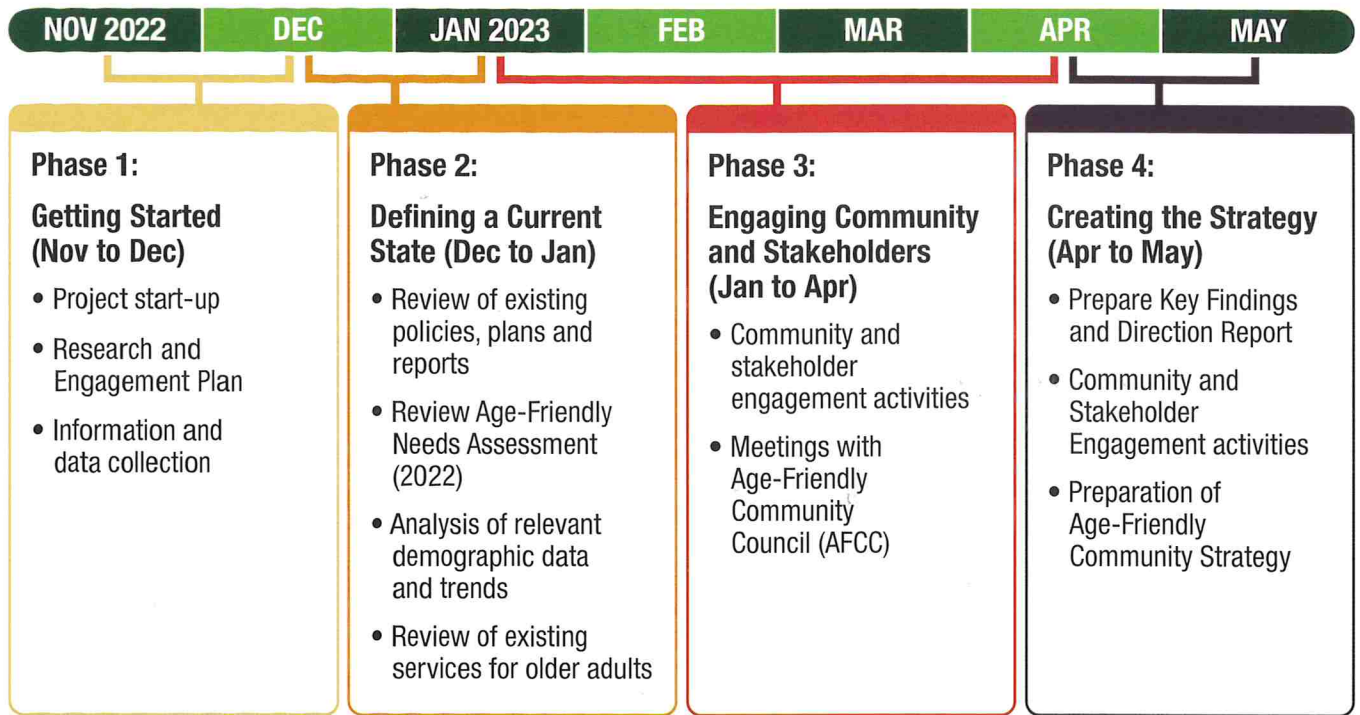
Phase 2: Defining a Current State (December 2022 to January 2023) – Review of existing policies, plans, and reports; review age-friendly needs assessment (2022); analysis of relevant demographic data and trends; and review of existing services for older adults.

Phase 3: Engaging Community and Stakeholders (January to April 2023) – Community and stakeholder engagement activities, and meetings with age-friendly community council (AFC council).

Phase 4: Creating the Strategy (April to May 2023) – Prepare key findings and direction report, community and stakeholder engagement activities, and preparation of age-friendly community strategy.

A number of success factors sustained interest and maintained momentum throughout the four-year period:

Figure 1
Age-friendly community strategy phases of development



The City of Richmond Hill's age-friendly community strategy was completed in four stages: getting started, defining a current state, engaging community and stakeholders, and creating the strategy. *Photo courtesy of City of Richmond Hill*

- Identify a champion to gain support from council and secure commitment from staff, management, and working level
- Align the age-friendly communities initiative with the city's identified strategic priorities
- Build upon existing programs and past projects focusing on older adults
- Pursue provincial funding and seek guidance from materials such as the provincial age-friendly communities planning guide
- Retain an external consultant with expertise in working with staff to undertake the project
- Engage community and stakeholders in multiple methods, including online surveys, focus groups, interviews, and workshops
- Communicate in traditional and digital forms
- Create an age-friendly community logo that is visually appealing and helps draw attention to the project
- Take an inclusive approach to promote engagement from diverse communities, including promoting the project in non-English languages commonly spoken in the community

- Present council with a robust action plan to implement the strategy with concrete steps, such as creating a senior coffee chat and incorporating a complete streets planning framework

Encouraging Co-operation with Age-Friendly Community Council

As initially advocated in the motion, staff recommended that Richmond Hill establish an AFC council made up of community members aged 55 and above. The terms of reference, approved by city council, anticipates a membership with balanced representation of abilities and gender, as well as representation from local business and community organizations serving seniors.

Recruitment for the AFC council was underway in late 2022. In January 2023, the AFC council held its first meeting, with 20 members appointed to serve a two-year term.

Since then, the AFC council has met again in March and September 2023 to discuss issues arising from the community needs assessment and provide input to the preparation of the age-friendly community strategy. As well, the city further engaged the community and stakeholders

in the form of workshop facilitated by the external consultant in April 2023.

In October 2023, staff tabled the strategy for council's consideration. The strategy envisions an inclusive, accessible, and welcoming community where all ages and abilities enjoy an active and healthy lifestyle. Council endorsed the age-friendly community strategy for implementation, with 21 actions aligning with the WHO's concept for age-friendly communities to "improve seniors' ability to age at home, live safely, and enjoy their community."

It is expected that the age-friendly community strategy will be infused into city policies, programs, and services such as recreation, parks, and public works. Furthermore, it is recognized that other orders of government and community partners also serve seniors in Richmond Hill. As such, the city will continue to work in collaboration with all relevant parties and stakeholders in launching the strategy.



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