



## Durham Region’s plan to tackle the climate crisis? Get inside your home

By Jennifer Foden

In January 2020, Durham Regional Council declared a climate emergency. “Of course [this] was about 90 days before the pandemic happened and we’ve had a lot happening since then that maybe is distracting people from that emergency,” says Ian McVey, manager of sustainability at the Regional Municipality of Durham. “But the reality is, it’s here.” McVey is right. The Insurance Bureau of Canada reported that the summer of 2024 was the costliest year to date with more than \$7 billion in insured losses from weather-related damages nationally.

And while the Region is making many strides to tackle the climate crisis on their own—their non-emergency vehicles are shifting to entirely electric; all new construction and major renovations for government buildings are net-zero emissions; they’re planning a zero-emission bus fleet by 2037; and they’re about one-third of the way through an energy retrofit of the municipality’s 1,300 affordable housing unit portfolio—they are only responsible for three to five per cent of the total potential carbon emissions in Durham Region.

The rest? Transportation, buildings and industry. There are many ways to tackle this, of course, from electric vehicles for transportation to installing solar panels, low-carbon heating and cooling systems like heat pumps and more efficient lighting and appliances for buildings.

When it comes to individuals, McVey says that cost of living is often put forward as the reason why they can’t afford to make changes. However, he points out that groceries, taxes and insurance are all rising because of climate extremes. Another reason? They don’t know how. “More than 80 per cent of Durham residents think that climate change is real and are either alarmed or concerned,” says McVey. “So, there’s a large portion of residents that want to take action, but don’t know how.”

The Region’s response to this? Durham Greener Homes. The program launched in 2022; and at its core, is a personalized coaching service that helps residents complete home energy retrofits, which includes education on what financial incentives and





rebates they're eligible for. "These financial incentive programs change all the time. The eligibility rules are always shifting," says McVey. "So, to have a Durham Region resident call in and talk to someone who is up-to-date on all of that and give you that guidance is incredibly helpful." Furthermore, in June, the Region launched a virtual home energy assessment tool. The artificial intelligence leverages municipal property assessment data to generate a home energy audit with 90 per cent accuracy. McVey says that the tool is an entry point for residents to have conversations with an energy coach.

And that's not all. The Region has not only negotiated lower-interest loans through two credit unions to help residents finance projects, they've also pledged to cover any losses from defaults. McVey says they're also exploring direct municipal financing so they can offer even "better rates and terms." He adds: "What's the superpower of a municipality? It's our AAA credit rating and our ability to potentially offer concessional financing through the property tax or the water bill."

The result has been overwhelmingly positive: more than 1,600 residents have enrolled in the program since they launched in 2022, with more than 400 applicants in the past three months.

"[Durham Region] is doing something different," says Robert Bell, co-founder of Intelligent Community Forum. (The organization has an annual awards program that evaluates communities on six factors, including sustainability.) "You're trying to go out right into people's homes. And change how they live. I think that's terrific because you're going after cultural change as well."

This is part of a 10-article series profiling the innovation happening in Durham Region. The region has been recognized as one of the top seven Intelligent Communities in the world for the third year in a row. Learn more at [durham.ca/IntelligentCommunities](https://durham.ca/IntelligentCommunities) and [IntelligentCommunity.org](https://IntelligentCommunity.org).

