What is an Intelligent Community? Durham Region recognized as one of the world's top seven

By Jennifer Foden

[Durham Region](#), a municipality of close to 750,000 people and comprised of eight cities just east of Toronto—Ajax, Brock, Clarington, Oshawa, Pickering, Scugog, Uxbridge and Whitby—has been recognized as one of the top seven Intelligent Communities in the entire world. However, what is an Intelligent Community? Why does it matter? And what was the journey to get here?
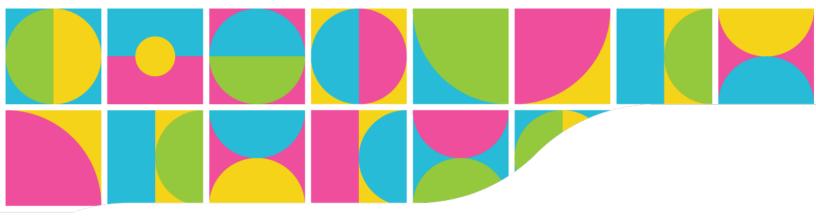
"This work began back in 2018, then led by the Strategic Initiatives team, where they pulled together the Hello Tomorrow: Durham Smart Cities Forum," says Alison Burgess, director of communications and engagement at the Regional Municipality of Durham. Over 300 people attended the event, including folks from local government, post-secondary, community partners, local businesses and members of the public. "Many ideas were shared and lots of collaboration and ideas came out of that event."

Then, in 2019, the federal government hosted the Smart Cities Challenge, a pan-Canadian competition to empower communities to improve the lives of their residents through innovation and technology. "We created internal working groups. We had IT and Economic Development and the CAO's office working together," says Burgess. "One thing we kept saying was: 'I think we're already doing a lot of this stuff.' We're working together; we're taking on innovative projects, we're creating open data and sharing that with our community partners."

Following that, the working group wanted to create some structure on how to partner on various projects moving forward and they came across the U.S.-based organization Intelligent Community Forum (ICF). "They had a network of communities. They brought these cities together to share best practices. So, we joined as a member of the organization," says Burgess. In addition to knowledge-sharing, ICF has an awards program that evaluates these communities.

So, Durham Region applied. Then the Intelligent Community Forum evaluates each applicant based on six factors: broadband connectivity, sustainability, knowledge work, digital inclusion, innovation and community engagement. "It has taken us 20 years of studying and working with hundreds of communities around the world to figure out how to measure all of that. Because until you can measure it, it's just glorious words," says Robert Bell, co-founder of Intelligent Community Forum. "And what we're really evaluating are the connections among these strategies, these programs and these partners in education, business and local governments."

In 2021, Durham was named as one of the top 21 communities of the year. In 2022 and 2023, they were narrowed down to the top seven. And this year, in 2024, they've been selected as one of the top seven for the third year in a row, along with two communities in Brazil, two in the U.S., one in Taiwan and another in Canada (Fredericton, New Brunswick). The winner will be announced in November; communities who have snagged the top spot over the past two decades include New York City, Winnipeg, Montreal, Melbourne, New Taipei City, Stockholm, Toronto and more.

The more important question here might be why this all matters—to residents of Durham Region and beyond. "Being recognized as a top Intelligent Community means to me that we're doing the right things around inclusion, job creation, community engagement and sustainability," says Burgess. "We all want to live in a community where we can thrive, have access to opportunities and look forward to a brighter future. The Intelligent Community Forum's framework has helped to guide the work that we—in municipalities, post-secondary, community organizations, across Durham—are doing to reach this vision. It makes me proud to live and work here."

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 and IntelligentCommunity.org.