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Striving together for a greener tomorrow

If the city is going to reach its emission reduction goals, it needs to be a group effort

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SPECIAL TO THE STAR

Vital Statistic: Greenhouse gas emissions in the city declined 18 per cent from 2004-2013 and 24 per cent since 1990

The city of Toronto has ambitious emissions-reduction targets aimed at making this a greener and cleaner place to live and work. The goal is to reduce emissions by 80 per cent below 1990 levels by 2050.

Work is already underway to determine the best approach for meeting that target. The city has partnered with the Toronto Atmospheric Fund (TAF) on Transform TO, the project that will chart the city's path toward 2050, and everyday citizens will play a big role.

The city established the Toronto Atmospheric Fund 25 years ago to focus on greenhouse-gas emissions and air pollution. It runs a variety of programs that involve a range of stakeholders, from residents to businesses to government, to help the city reach its emissions-related targets. A reduction of 6 per cent below 1990 levels was reached in 2012, and there remains one more goal between now and 2050. The city is aiming for 30 per cent by 2020, "which we are on track for," according to Bryan Purcell, director of policy and programs at TAF. The 2050 target, however, "remains a very daunting challenge," he added.

The Transform TO project has a few stages left before a plan is fully realized, but a survey of residents has yielded some insight into what the



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In 2012, the city reached the goal of reducing emissions to 6 per cent below 1990.

public thinks should be included. Residents expressed willingness to get involved in initiatives that would have an impact at their neighbourhood level, including green roofs and urban farming, community input into local design, and pedestrian and cycling infrastructure.

"Sometimes people have the idea in their head that the emissions are all about heavy industry, which, when we look nationally, are certainly a significant component," Purcell said. "But especially here in Toronto, the emissions are really about heating our homes and our buildings, the hot water that we use and travelling

around by car mainly to get to work and to other places."

Which means, "if emissions come from things we are doing at the community level," Purcell said, "the solutions really involve the community level, as well."

Solutions will be wide-ranging: Everything from building "complete communities" so residents don't have to travel far to get to work, socialize or do their shopping, to improving the energy efficiency of buildings and homes.

One mode of community engagement is the development and maintenance of green space, a potential

action item identified in the Transform TO community consultations.

Park People is one of the groups that empowers residents to take ownership of their local parks, which offer numerous benefits. The so-called "green canopy" of trees cools the air, reducing the need for air conditioning and curbing pollution, said Park People executive director Dave Harvey.

Greenspaces maintain the city's biodiversity, serving as home to numerous plants, insects and animals.

They are also an important meeting place, particularly for residents who live in highrises, for whom parks may

be their one connection with nature. The agency's Friends of City Parks initiative has more than 110 community-based groups that grow and maintain local parks.

Getting residents involved on such a localized project will have immediate benefits to the community, Harvey added.

"You can start building some positive momentum by getting the community together, getting their ideas about what can be done in the green space and having the community take ownership of that space and making positive change happen," Harvey said.

Before the Transform TO plan can be hammered out, technical studies must be completed. These include modelling what would happen to emissions and air quality if the city continued with its current course.

Then, different scenarios based on all of the possible steps will be tested.

Factored into the decision-making will be how each intervention, in addition to its impact on emissions and air quality, may fulfil other community priorities, such as health, equity, prosperity and mobility.

By the end of this year, the TAF expects to release an interim report on how to reach the 2020 target, with a plan for meeting the 2050 goal coming in the second quarter of next year. It's that report that will form the basis for debate at city hall and public consultations, Purcell said.

"I often find that many people are distressed and despondent about climate change and our prospects for addressing it," Purcell said.

"It's kind of a well-kept secret that we're leading in many ways a lot of North America and the industrialized world in terms of reducing emissions. But there's a lot of work to do."