

If this information is required in an accessible format, please contact 1-800-372-1102 ext. 2564



The Regional Municipality of Durham Report

To: Community Growth and Economic Development Committee
From: Commissioner of Community Growth and Economic Development
Report: #2026-CG-9
Date: April 7, 2026

Subject:

Continuation and Enhancement of the Durham Greener Buildings Program

Recommendation:

That the Community Growth and Economic Development Committee recommends to Regional Council:

- A) That Regional Council endorse the continuation of the Durham Greener Buildings Program for the period 2026–2029, as outlined in this report;
- B) That staff be directed to pursue external funding opportunities and partnerships to enable additional program enhancements, including expanded outreach and engagement with the commercial building sector and increased alignment with utility conservation and demand management programs;
- C) That the Commissioner of Community Growth and Economic Development or designate be authorized to execute the necessary agreement and any ancillary documents with Windfall Ecology Centre on a single source agreement and any ancillary agreements in forms satisfactory to the Regional Solicitor and Commissioner of Finance, to support joint implementation of the Program, as required; and

- D) This report and associated resolution(s) be forwarded to local area municipalities, the Ontario Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing, the Ontario Ministry of Energy, Natural Resources Canada, the Association of Municipalities of Ontario and the Federation of Canadian Municipalities for information.
-

Report:

1. Purpose

- 1.1 This report seeks Council endorsement for continuation of the Durham Greener Buildings (DGB) Program (the “Program”) for another three-year implementation period (2026-2029). Specifically, this report proposes the continuation of support for building energy benchmarking, strengthening participation within the Broader Public Sector and community housing sector, and advancing municipal facility energy performance. Continuation of the Program enables the Region to build on the outcomes of the initial 3-year implementation phase, while refining its delivery model based on lessons learned.
- 1.2 This report also seeks direction for staff to collaborate with local utilities and partner organizations to pursue external funding and partnerships that would enable further program enhancements, including expanded support for building retrofits and increased engagement with the commercial building sector. The proposed Program extension will help maintain momentum in improving building energy performance, reducing community-wide greenhouse gas emissions, and supporting cost savings and operational efficiencies for participating organizations, while aligning with Regional sustainability goals and provincial building energy benchmarking requirements.

2. Background

- 2.1 The Durham Greener Buildings (DGB) Program supports Durham Region’s long-term climate and energy objectives by building capacity for energy benchmarking, performance tracking, and retrofit planning across the existing building stock. Buildings account for approximately 33% of the Region’s community-wide greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, and improving the performance of existing buildings is a critical component of achieving Durham’s climate targets.
- 2.2 The DGB Program was developed to align with the [Durham Community Energy Plan](#) (DCEP), which identifies deep energy retrofits in existing buildings as a key strategy to reduce GHG emissions and advance the transition to a low-carbon economy. The DGB Program functions as a voluntary capacity-building initiative that

complements [Ontario's Energy and Water Reporting and Benchmarking \(EWRB\) regulation](#) by supporting building owners and managers in collecting, managing, and interpreting energy and water data through ENERGY STAR Portfolio Manager (ESPM).

2.3 Since its launch in 2024, the DGB Program has focused on strengthening participation within the Broader Public Sector (BPS), improving data quality and readiness for performance analysis, and piloting strategies to engage the commercial and multi-unit residential sectors.

3. Summary of Durham Greener Buildings Program Implementation (2023-2026)

3.1 Over its first three years of implementation, the Program has demonstrated steady growth in participation and measurable improvements in data completeness and quality. Below is a detailed summary of program implementation:

- In Year 1 (2023) the Program focused on program start-up, launching the Building Challenge, developing an outreach strategy for commercial building engagement, engaging with municipalities and educational organizations through establishment of the Durham Greener Buildings Partnership.
- In Year 2 (2024), the Program enrolled 487 Broader Public Sector buildings across Durham Region municipalities and public institutions. This launch phase focused on establishing foundational program elements, onboarding early participants, and delivering targeted engagement activities, including stakeholder workshops, sector-specific webinars, and the first annual recognition event.
- In Year 3 (2025), participation increased to 545 Broader Public Sector buildings, representing an 11.9% increase in enrollment. Participation from the private and non-profit housing sectors also began to emerge, though remained limited. A key achievement during this period was the significant improvement in benchmarking data quality. Buildings with a full 12 months of energy data increased from 320 in 2024 to 509 in 2025, raising data completeness from approximately 66% to over 93% of enrolled buildings.

3.2 These year over year improvements were driven by sustained technical assistance, follow-up with participants, and increased familiarity with ENERGY STAR Portfolio Manager and reporting requirements.

3.3 Program activities over this period included:

- Delivery of stakeholder workshops and sector-specific educational webinars.
- Establishment of a Greener Buildings Partnership as a stakeholder advisory and capacity-building forum.
- Development of individualized building performance and insight reports.
- Implementation of data-driven outreach and engagement strategies to commercial building participants.
- Introduction of annual recognition and performance-based awards.

3.4 Collectively, these activities positioned the Program as a trusted entry point for benchmarking and performance improvement within Durham Region's public and institutional building sectors.

3.5 Implementation of the Program has generated several important lessons:

- Sustained participation and improved outcomes are strongly linked to hands-on technical support. Many organizations lack internal capacity to manage benchmarking independently, particularly during initial onboarding. Direct support has been essential to achieving increased data quality and continued engagement.
- Improving outcomes among existing participants has proven more effective than prioritizing rapid expansion. Focusing on data completeness and performance tracking has yielded more immediate and measurable benefits than broad but shallow recruitment efforts.
- Sector-specific engagement approaches are required. The motivations, constraints, and decision-making structures of public institutions, non-profit housing providers, and commercial property owners differ substantially. Tailored outreach and messaging improved program relevance and effectiveness.

3.6 Challenges and Barriers:

3.7 Implementation of the DGB program identified several barriers that limited participation and increased the level of effort required for effective outreach and engagement. These are summarized below:

- **Limited awareness and understanding** among commercial, institutional, and multi-unit residential building owners and tenants regarding energy benchmarking requirements, program objectives, and the potential value of

participation, which reduced responsiveness and required additional foundational education.

- **Challenges accessing accurate and up-to-date commercial building ownership and contact information**, compounded by privacy legislation that restricts staff access to building owner contact details, which limited the ability to conduct direct and targeted outreach to eligible commercial building owners and managers.
- **Effort associated with outreach and onboarding** - these demands were particularly pronounced during peak provincial reporting periods, placing additional pressure on program resources.
- **Portfolio-level participation dynamics**, where many commercial building owners manage properties across multiple jurisdictions and rely on separate corporate or national reporting systems, reducing the incentive to engage in a voluntary, regionally focused program.
- **Split incentives in multi-tenant buildings**, which limited alignment between landlords and tenants and reduced interest in benchmarking and data disclosure activities.
- **Concerns related to data privacy and data disclosure**, with some building owners hesitant to participate due to uncertainty about how building performance data would be used, shared, or protected.

3.8 Collectively, these early implementation challenges highlighted the need for more streamlined processes, prioritization of high-impact participants, and stronger alignment with partner programs and utility-led outreach efforts, which are reflected in the proposed Phase 2 program refinements.

3.9 Key takeaways from the first phase of DGB program implementation include:

- Energy benchmarking has proven to be an effective entry point for building retrofit planning, supporting both individual building improvements and portfolio-level decision-making.
- Data quality and reporting consistency improve significantly when participants receive ongoing technical support, follow-up, and guidance.
- Recognition and peer learning play an important role in strengthening participation and normalizing performance transparency. Recognition initiatives, including engagement activities such as the Building Challenge, provided motivation, encouraged healthy competition, and helped showcase leadership in sustainability and climate action across the Region.

- Public sector participation has provided leadership and proof-of-concept, demonstrating feasibility and helping build confidence for broader market transformation.
- Multi-unit residential and social housing buildings represent high-impact opportunities for targeted retrofit support, given their scale, energy use, and potential community benefits.

3.10 Overall, the Program has successfully established a foundation for building energy performance tracking and has demonstrated the value of a coordinated, voluntary approach to capacity-building within the existing building sector.

4. Continuation of Durham Greener Buildings – 2026-2029

4.1 Subject to Council approval, staff propose to extend the DGB Program for a three-year period (2026-2029) as Phase 2 of the Program. The proposed extension builds on the outcomes of the initial implementation phase and responds directly to lessons learned regarding data quality, participant capacity, and the need for stronger alignment with financing and utility incentive programs. Phase 2 is intended to strengthen program effectiveness, expand participation, and better position building owners to advance energy efficiency and emissions reduction efforts.

4.2 The objectives of Phase 2 are to:

- Support continued energy and water benchmarking using ENERGY STAR Portfolio Manager, maintaining benchmarking as a foundational entry point for performance tracking and retrofit planning.
- Strengthen participation and performance outcomes within the Broader Public Sector (BPS) and the multi-unit residential and social housing sectors, where significant energy-saving and community benefit opportunities exist.
- Improve data quality and readiness for performance analysis and retrofit planning through enhanced technical support, follow-up, and reporting consistency.
- Expand the Durham Greener Buildings Partnership as a stakeholder advisory and capacity-building forum. Collaboration with local utilities would support this objective by leveraging utility expertise and resources for marketing, outreach, engagement with commercial building owners, and the delivery of workshops and sponsored events.
- Facilitate access to financing, incentives, and technical support for building retrofits, helping to address key implementation barriers and supporting retrofit activity, including within community housing portfolios.

- Align municipal and utility outreach efforts to support energy efficiency, peak demand reduction, and emissions reductions to streamline coordination and engagement efforts.
- 4.3 Phase 2 will maintain and enhance the core elements of the Durham Greener Buildings (DGB) Program to strengthen delivery, improve participant experience, and support measurable performance outcomes. Key program elements include:
- Ongoing technical support for energy and water benchmarking, reporting, and data quality improvement to ensure consistent and reliable performance tracking.
 - Targeted webinars, workshops, and engagement events designed to build capacity, share practical guidance, and support participant onboarding and retention.
 - Continued operation of the Durham Greener Buildings Partnership, as a platform for BPS leadership, peer learning, and best-practice sharing. BPS participants will continue to play a leadership role by sharing experiences, promoting program participation, and supporting outreach to the commercial building sector through events and knowledge exchange.
 - Annual performance-based recognition and awards to acknowledge leadership, encourage continuous improvement, and normalize transparency in building performance.
 - Individualized building performance and insight reports to provide participants with actionable feedback and support decision-making for retrofit planning.
 - Implement the Battle of the Buildings (BoB) competition to translate standardized benchmarking data into measurable action through peer comparison, technical support, public recognition, and performance-based motivation.
 - Development and deployment of a digital ESPM-based chatbot to support benchmarking activities, data interpretation, and participant self-service.
- 4.4 Focus on community housing and broader public sector building portfolios.
- 4.5 Phase 2 will place increased emphasis on advancing energy benchmarking and retrofit readiness within community housing and BPS building portfolios. This focus builds on the Program's early success within the BPS and reflects the high potential for cost savings, greenhouse gas emissions reductions, and co-benefits related to housing affordability and energy poverty. The Region has secured funding to support retrofit initiatives within the community housing sector, creating a timely opportunity to better align benchmarking and planning activities with implementation

funding. Phase 2 of the DGB Program will thus support this alignment by helping to identify and prioritize high-impact retrofit candidates and improve project readiness.

4.6 Targeted support for these portfolios will include:

- Prioritized technical assistance to support benchmarking, data quality, and performance analysis;
- Identification of high impact retrofit opportunities, informed by existing Community Housing Building Construction Assessments (BCAs);
- Weather-ready and climate resilience assessments to help identify retrofit measures that improve building performance while increasing climate resilience; and
- Alignment with available funding and incentive programs to support implementation readiness and reduce financial barriers to retrofit activity. By strengthening the link between benchmarking, retrofit readiness, and available funding, Phase Two will enhance the Region's ability to advance retrofit delivery within public and community housing portfolios, while reinforcing leadership in climate action and equitable energy transition outcomes.

4.7 Utility and Partner Collaboration

4.8 As part of Phase 2 implementation, staff will collaborate with local electricity and gas utilities (e.g. Elexicon Energy, Oshawa Power and Utilities Corporation (OPUC), Hydro One, and Enbridge Gas) as well as funding partners such as the Toronto Atmospheric Fund (TAF), to enable additional program enhancements, while maintaining a focus on core municipal and Broader Public Sector priorities.

4.9 Engagement with privately owned commercial buildings has proven to be resource-intensive and challenging due to limited internal capacity among building owners, competing operational priorities, and uncertainty regarding the value of benchmarking. At the same time, fiscal constraints require the Region to prioritize core services and public sector leadership, limiting the level of direct outreach that can be sustained for the broader commercial market.

4.10 Utility partnerships are intended to help address this engagement gap by leveraging existing customer relationships, trusted communication channels, and alignment with utility conservation and demand management objectives. Through these partnerships, utility-funded activities would be directed toward:

- Targeted marketing and communications to increase participation in the DGB Program.
- Sponsorship of workshops and educational events that highlight pathways from benchmarking to action.
- Commercial sector outreach within utility service territories.
- Connection of building owners to utility incentive programs and technical supports.

4.11 This collaborative approach would strengthen participation in Ontario's EWRB initiative, support uptake of utility conservation programs, and improve coordination between municipal and utility outreach efforts.

4.12 Program Delivery and Phasing

4.13 Phase 2 of the DGB Program will be delivered over a three-year period (2026–2029) using a phased approach that allows for program refinement, partnership development, and long-term scalability.

- **Year 1 (2026–2027):** Focus on system development and partnership building, including deployment of the ENERGY STAR Portfolio Manager (ESPM)–based benchmarking chatbot, refinement of communications and outreach strategies, early research and alignment with financing mechanisms, and strengthened collaboration with utilities and funding partners.
- **Year 2 (2027–2028):** Focus on integration with identified financing and incentive programs, expanded collaboration with partner organizations, and continued delivery of technical support and capacity-building activities to support increased participation and improved performance outcomes.
- **Year 3 (2028–2029):** Focus on program evaluation, optimization, and consolidation of tools, partnerships, and delivery approaches to support long-term scalability across the building sector.

4.14 Each year will culminate in an annual recognition event to acknowledge leadership and performance improvements among participating organizations.

4.15 Performance Measurement and Indicators

4.16 Phase 2 success will be assessed using the following key performance indicators, which reflect both program efficiency and market transformation outcomes:

- Improved data quality and completeness, including increased consistency, accuracy, and completeness of energy and water benchmarking data submitted by participants.
- Growth in program participation across priority sectors, including Broader Public Sector, community housing, and privately owned commercial buildings.
- More streamlined outreach and technical support delivery, reflected in reduced reliance on manual data requests and increased use of tools such as ESPM data sharing and automated support functions.
- Enhanced tenant and occupant engagement, supported through coordinated strategies with utility partners, including bill inserts, targeted communications, and shared outreach campaigns.
- Increased recognition of benchmarking as a decision-support tool, rather than solely a compliance activity, evidenced by greater use of benchmarking data to inform planning, retrofit readiness, and participation in incentive and financing programs.
- Increased energy efficiency incentives and rebates accruing to Program participants from provincial and federal energy efficiency programs.

4.17 Together, these indicators will support ongoing evaluation of Phase 2 outcomes and inform future program refinement, while ensuring alignment with Regional climate, energy efficiency, and capacity-building objectives.

5. Financial Implications

5.1 The total Regional cost of the proposed Durham Greener Buildings Phase 2 Program is \$150,000 annually over three years, subject to Council approval through the Annual Business Planning and Budget process.

5.2 Funding will support delivery of core program services, including benchmarking support, technical assistance, stakeholder engagements, program administration, and performance-based recognition activities.

5.3 Staff also propose to pursue external funding and partnership contributions from local utilities and other funding organizations to enable program enhancements, particularly to support commercial sector outreach, marketing, and engagement. Any external contributions secured would be used to supplement Regional funding and expand program activities without increasing the Regional cost.

- 5.4 As per Appendix C of the Purchasing By-law (#16-2020), single source purchases are permitted if additional deliveries by the original supplier for goods/services not included in initial procurement if a change of supplier cannot be made due to interchangeability/interoperability with existing goods/services from initial procurement and would cause significant inconvenience or substantial duplication of costs. With Council approval of the recommendations in this report, staff will negotiate a single source agreement with the Windfall Ecology Centre with terms and conditions satisfactory to the Regional Solicitor and Commissioner of Finance.
- 5.5 In the event that external partnership funding is not secured, the Program will proceed as within the approved Regional budget envelope.

6. Previous Reports and Decisions

- 6.1 The Durham Greener Buildings (DGB) program was established in 2024, following Regional Council's adoption of the recommendations outlined in [Report #2023-COW-16](#).

7. Conclusion and Next Steps

- 7.1 The Durham Greener Buildings Program has established a strong foundation for improving energy performance and reducing greenhouse gas emissions across Durham Region's building sector. The first phase of implementation demonstrated the value of a coordinated, voluntary, and capacity-building approach to energy benchmarking, particularly within the Broader Public Sector.
- 7.2 The proposed Phase 2 extension builds on this foundation by maintaining core benchmarking and engagement functions while strengthening alignment with retrofit financing, utility incentive programs, and partner initiatives. Increased emphasis on community housing, as well as public sector buildings will help address energy affordability and operational efficiency, while collaboration with utilities will support more effective engagement with the commercial sector.
- 7.3 Subject to Council approval, staff will proceed with:
- Negotiating a single source agreement with Windfall Ecology Centre
 - Finalizing partnership discussions with local utilities and funding organizations
 - Implementing the Phase 2 work plan beginning in 2026
 - Continuing annual performance tracking and reporting
 - Delivering annual recognition and stakeholder engagement activities.

- 7.4 The proposed extension of the Durham Greener Buildings Program will support the Region's climate objectives, improve building performance outcomes, and position Durham Region to advance building retrofit readiness in alignment with the Region's sustainability objectives.
- 7.5 For additional information, contact: Ian McVey, Director of Environment and Climate at 905-668-7711, extension 3803.
- 7.6 Approved by Ian McVey, Director of Environment and Climate at 905-668-7711, extension 3803.

8. Relationship to Strategic Plan

- 8.1 This report aligns with/addresses the following Strategic Direction(s) and Pathway(s) in Durham Region's 2025-2035 Strategic Plan:
- Environmental Sustainability and Climate Action
 - E1. Reduce corporate greenhouse gas emissions to meet established targets.
 - E2. Collaborate with partners on the low-carbon transition to reduce community greenhouse gas emissions across Durham Region.
 - E3. Prepare for and respond to severe weather impacts.
 - E4. Lead the transition to sustainable living through waste management, diversion, and the circular economy.
 - Resilient Local Economies
 - R1. Attract and retain quality employers that strengthen key economic sectors, including energy and technology.
 - R3. Develop, attract, and support a skilled and qualified workforce, including youth and newcomers.
 - Strong Relationships
 - S3. Collaborate across local area municipalities, with agencies, non-profits, and community partners to deliver co-ordinated and efficient services.

Prepared by: Nayel Halim, Policy Advisor, at 905-668-7711, extension 3803.

Respectfully submitted,

Original signed by

Sandra Austin
Commissioner of Community Growth and
Economic Development

Recommended for Presentation to Committee

Original signed by

Elaine C. Baxter-Trahair
Chief Administrative Officer