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Planners set new green goals

With the municipality beating its own targets, the focus is shifting to the public and the private sector

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With the city consistently meeting and surpassing its internal environmental goals, 2008 is the year to figure out how to get residents and the private sector thinking green, officials say.

"We're on the front lines, and we are getting it done with very little in the way of resources," said Alta Vista Councillor Peter Hume, who chairs the environment committee. "The challenge now is get the city as a whole meeting these goals."

Indeed, the late-1990s' goal to reduce the municipal government's greenhouse gas emissions by 20 per cent from 1990 levels by 2007 was met three years early in 2004 when, through a number of programs, it achieved a 24.7-per-cent reduction. New internal programs since 2004 have further reduced emissions. As well, a full assessment of greenhouse gases in 2009 is expected to show the municipal government has reduced pollutants caused from burning fossil fuels dramatically, especially with hundreds of diesel/electric hybrid buses hitting the roads in 2008 and 2009.

But the goal of reducing emissions across the city by 20 per cent by 2012 is not going to be met if current trends continue.

While the city is doing what it can, progress on overall environmental goals has been limited by the fact that provinces, not municipalities, have the main jurisdiction over environmental issues.

Despite this - or perhaps because of it - Nancy Schepers, the deputy city manager of planning, transit and the environment, says 2008 should be a year of developing better tools to encourage residents and businesses to incorporate sound environmental practices.

"We've been showing people that it can be done, with limited success. Now I think we need to find ways of getting people to do things. We need to look at providing incentives for people to do it, and ways of showing them the benefits," Ms. Schepers said.

The municipality has put together a directory of its environmental initiatives, complete with an exhaustive list of things residents can do to help. It is revamping its overall green strategy.

Ms. Schepers said her department is developing a plan to measure progress toward environmental goals and encourage the community to buy into them. The department is also looking at providing tax and development-charge breaks for companies that build environmentally sound buildings, promoting green roofs in private development and other incentive programs.

"We don't have control of these things, but we can influence them and show people the

way to do them," she said.

Brigit Isernhagen, an environmental planner with the city, says residents across the city will be consulted on a number of environmental policies, including those related to new development.

She said the city will be looking at setting a number of environmental standards related to development in general and particularly developments close to ecologically sensitive land. The city will also initiate programs to help community organizations and residents start small-scale solar-energy projects.

"It's an exciting time and we're looking forward to moving environmental issues ahead," Ms. Isernhagen said said.

Mr. Hume agreed, but said the city can only do so much.

With more than 80 per cent of Canadians living in cities, it's time for the upper-tier governments to either give municipalities more power over environmental issues or get much more involved, Mr. Hume said. For example, federal and provincial governments should bring in stricter emissions limits for vehicles and industries.

"We are taking small steps because we don't have the jurisdiction or we can't afford to take big ones," Mr. Hume said.

"Environmental concerns really aren't debatable anymore. We simply have to take the next steps towards a more sustainable existence, but we need to have residents, businesses and other governments take those steps with us."

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