

Item for the Action of the Regional Watershed Alliance

TO: Chair and Members of the Regional Watershed Alliance
Wednesday, March 02, 2022 Meeting

FROM: John MacKenzie, Chief Executive Officer

RE: **APPROVAL OF 2022-2023 TRCA YOUTH COUNCIL EXECUTIVE AND TRCA YOUTH COUNCIL 2021-2022 ANNUAL REPORT**

KEY ISSUE

To receive Regional Watershed Alliance approval of the composition of the 2022-2023 TRCA Youth Council Executive and present the 2021-2022 Youth Council Annual Report and provide highlights of the Youth Council's term.

RECOMMENDATION

WHEREAS TRCA's Youth Council has been active for three years, and the 2021-2022 Youth Council Executive have completed their most recent one-year term, ending March 2022;

THEREFORE LET IT BE RESOLVED that the Youth Council Executive's term be extended for an additional year for those eligible members who wish to continue;

AND FURTHER THAT the Regional Watershed Alliance accept the recruitment of additional Youth Council Executives to fill vacant seats;

AND FURTHER THAT the Regional Watershed Alliance accept the appended Youth Council Annual Report summarizing the work completed and evaluation of the Youth Council's 2021-2022 term.

BACKGROUND

Youth Councils are being deployed around the world as a means to engage and inspire youth in community building efforts. TRCA's 2017 Community Engagement Strategy recommended the development of a Youth Council. The program framework of the Youth Council was developed by TRCA staff and Regional Watershed Alliance members through 2018 and 2019 and is now in place. The ultimate goal of the Youth Council is to contribute towards building healthy communities. This work is achieved through four program objectives:

- a) Build capacity and engage youth by providing youth across the Toronto region with learning opportunities;
- b) Build a youth network/strengthen existing networks through creation of a broad network of youth in the region that is interested in environmental and sustainability issues;
- c) Identify youth perspectives by developing an understanding of youth opinion around current environmental issues and how these might be incorporated in the work of TRCA and its partners; and
- d) Create fun opportunities for youth through entertaining and engaging learning opportunities.

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The framework for the Youth Council was approved by the Regional Watershed Alliance (RWA) in February 2018 (RES.#R11/17).

Youth Council members may either join as a General Member or an Executive Member. General Members can take part in Youth Council events and initiatives and there is no significant vetting process to join as a General Member, nor any limit on the number of General Members. The Executive Membership, which consists of ten members, serve as the guiding body for the Youth Council and are responsible for the development of program activities and priorities that fit within the objects defined in the program framework, in collaboration with TRCA staff. Executive Members have a one-year term with the possibility of extension for an additional year and are appointed through an annual application and selection process that involves relevant TRCA staff and the RWA Youth Council Working Group, in accordance with TRCA's Public Appointments Policy. The most recent 2021-2022 Youth Council Executive term ends in March 2022.

RATIONALE

Appointment of 2022-2023 Youth Council Executive

The ten members of the 2021-2022 Youth Council Executive were selected in February 2021 and included four returning members from the previous year. For the 2022-2023 Youth Council Executive term, it is recommended that the following existing members who were eligible to have their terms extended by an additional year and chose to continue on the Executive, be appointed for the 2022-2023 Youth Council Executive Term:

- Akash Kar
- Alliza Leogo
- Lillian Zhang

Recruitment to fill the Youth Council Executive vacancies for the 2022-2023 term was held from January 3 to January 31, 2022 and eighteen (18) applications were received. Of these applications, it was deemed that fifteen (15) applicants met the minimum criteria for Youth Council Executive membership based on age and residential or school attendance location within TRCA's jurisdiction. Youth Council Executive applications were reviewed by relevant program staff and by members of the RWA Youth Council Working Group. As a result, it is recommended that the following applicants be approved as members of the 2022-2023 Youth Council Executive:

- Bumika Srikanthalingam
- Elly Akuyu
- Erinn Lee
- Kasturi Bhatt
- Maham Malik
- Meetika Kher
- Vamika Sharma

2021-2022 Youth Council Achievements

The current Youth Council Executive term (2021-2022) was the first full term that the program shifted entirely online. As a result, meetings and program initiatives have been adapted to suit that format.

Returning Executive members met with TRCA staff to develop a short series of online introductory working meetings that were held in March 2021. These meetings included interactive presentations introducing program framework, a general introduction to TRCA, work planning and goal setting, and a team building activity in the form of a “bake-along” where a Youth Council Executive member led a baking activity remotely. From these meetings, a communication framework was agreed upon, which included email as the primary means of contact, monthly meetings to be held the first Tuesday of each month, and additional meetings to be booked as necessary.

Youth Council Executive worked together to create a workplan to address program goals. This plan included regular newsletter communications to the General Membership, collaborative events to be held in partnerships with other agencies (such as the Toronto Zoo and Protect Our Winters), learning opportunities around Indigenous reconciliation, capacity building workshops around career building in the conservation sector, and a research initiative to better understand youth perspectives around inclusion in greenspace.

COVID-19 Pandemic Impact to Programming

The pandemic has continued to impact the Youth Council programming and has shifted the entire program to a virtual format. As this was the second year of the pandemic, the 2021-2022 Youth Council Executive had more time to adjust to the new realities brought on by COVID-19 compared to the 2020 Executive. This has meant that the 2021 Executive already had familiarity with online platforms and engagement initiatives with no required adjustment period.

This shift to online programming has had the benefit of increasing consistency in participation among Executive members as the barriers to participating in meetings has been greatly reduced by holding them online rather than in person. The Youth Council Executive has remained engaged throughout the duration of their term, which can also be attributed to the expectations set at the beginning of the term, and the passion and drive of those volunteer members. Furthermore, by shifting more events online, the recordings of these events are able to be shared on TRCA’s website, allowing them to be viewed and accessed on an ongoing basis.

Youth Council Highlights from 2021-2022

The following events were created and delivered by the Youth Council Executive members, under the guidance and support of TRCA staff.

Online Movie Night: Climate Change (February 2021)

This online movie night featured Protect Our Winter’s film “Electric Greg.” The film covers one man’s journey transitioning to a lifestyle that includes skiing but no fossil-fuels. There were two presentations following the movie, the first from Protect Our Winters to discuss their climate change programming in winter sports, and the second from TRCA’s Climate and Ecosystem Science team. The Youth Council Executive then led a panel discussion with both speakers. This event had 16 participants.

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Online Movie Night: Hidden Rivers (May 2021)

Hidden Rivers is a documentary that explores the health and biodiversity of rivers in the United States Appalachian region. While there are some geographic differences between Appalachia and the Toronto region, many of the lessons around river health are true to both regions. Following the film, a panel discussion was held featuring the Toronto Zoo's Great Lakes and Aqua-Links Program and TRCA's Aquatic Monitoring and Management team. There were 29 participants at this event.

Facebook Live: Electrofishing in Toronto Harbour (July 2021)

TRCA's Watershed Planning and Ecosystem Science team invited the Youth Council to co-host a live broadcast of electro-fishing in the Toronto Harbour. The event was broadcast on both Facebook Live and YouTube, and featured fishing demonstrations, fish identification, interviews with monitoring staff, and tours of the electrofishing boat. Participants were also invited to pose their own questions that were answered by staff live. At the time of broadcast there were 559 views (443 Facebook, 126 YouTube) and a recording of this event remains available online.

Come Learn With Us: Indigenous Canada Course (three events, held in June, July, and September 2021)

Indigenous Reconciliation has been a topic of increasing interest among both General and Executive members of the Youth Council (see Attachment 1). The Youth Council Executive discussed at length how they could incorporate principles of reconciliation into their own work with the Youth Council. They decided that educating themselves, as a settler group, about Indigenous history and experiences would be an important first step toward reconciliation. The University of Alberta offers a free self-directed online course "Indigenous Canada" through the online platform Coursera. Course topics include land claims, environmental impacts, legal systems, Indigenous history, and current issues that affect Indigenous people today. The Youth Council Executive challenged themselves to take this course, and then hosted three online discussions at regular intervals over several months. They also invited General Members and other youth to join them in taking the course and participating in the discussion, hence the title of the campaign: "Come Learn With Us". There were few participants in these discussions beyond the Executive members, but the Executive believed that the discussion and incorporation of reconciliation into Youth Council programming was, nevertheless, worthwhile.

Ask Me Anything: Getting into Conservation (two events held in June and September 2021)

This year the Youth Council Executive was fortunate to have strong participation from a high school student, Lillian Zhang. While many of the activities that the Youth Council Executive has organized in the past may have been of interest to all General Members, there were no campaigns aimed specifically at high school-aged members. To address this, Lillian suggested that the group create an online event for high school students who were interested in pursuing conservation/environment in post-secondary school. Rather than having TRCA staff discuss their professional journey, which may not be as immediately relevant for current high school students, this event featured the stories of the current Youth Council Executive. This provided strong peer-to-peer learning/mentorship and provided an opportunity for capacity building among both the participants and the presenters.

This event was very well received with 25 participants. The Youth Council Executive each presented their own journey from high school to university, and for some, the transition into their early careers. A lengthy discussion took place following the presentation, where participants were invited to unmute themselves and engage with the group directly. There was enough

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interest in the event that the Youth Council Executive decided to host a second event in September, which saw 13 participants.

Greenspace Accessibility Research Project

The Youth Council Executive has consistently remained interested in Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) topics surrounding the environmental field, including the importance of greenspace and barriers for certain groups to access greenspace. As a reflection of the research-background that many Executive members have, it was proposed to carry out a research project to determine the barriers faced by certain youth groups and audiences to accessing greenspace and make recommendations from a DEI perspective, which could also benefit TRCA's work. This project aligns with the Youth Council mandate to identify youth perspectives around environmental issues and how these might be incorporated in the work of TRCA and its partners.

TRCA staff have been extremely interested in supporting the Greenspace Accessibility Research Project and as a result, it has expanded to involve various teams, including Conservation Parks and Lands, Education and Training, and Ecosystem and Climate Science, staff who have helped scope and resourcing strategy for the project. The development of this research project is ongoing and will remain a long-term initiative of the Youth Council Executive. This work is also helping to lay the groundwork for how the Youth Council can be better integrated with the workings of TRCA.

#TRCANatureStories Social Media Campaign

In order to engage a wider audience in greenspace, as well as help TRCA social media audiences get to know the Youth Council Executive, the Executive members led a social media campaign called “#TRCANature Stories” in which each Executive member drafted a short post about getting out into nature, as well as associated images. TRCA social media followers were encouraged to share their own “nature stories”.

Developing Your Environmental Career Online Event

The Youth Council Executive held an online event on February 17, 2022 to help support young people, students and young professionals interested in entering the environmental field as a career. The event was divided into two components. In the first part, Executive members walked participants through tips and interactive exercises on finding, applying and interviewing for jobs of interest. Executive members were supported by TRCA staff in Human Resources and Education, Training and Outreach staff who provided resources to be shared and incorporated into the event. In the second part of the event, Executive members facilitated a panel discussion with five professionals in different sectors of the environmental field who spoke about their career path and answered attendee questions. Over 60 people registered for the event, with 19 attending live.

Program Evaluation and Recommendations

The 2021-2022 Youth Council Executive was consistently highly engaged throughout their term. They delivered a wide variety of events that ranged from movie nights to peer-to-peer mentorship, to challenging discussions around indigenous reconciliation. The continued engagement of the Executive could be attributed to several factors including: strong mentorship from returning Youth Council Executives who helped to establish expectations and norms from the outset; tapping into a strong network of applicants; and reduced barriers to participation due to the shift to a virtual format.

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The positive impact of the Youth Council program for Executive members can be seen in their continued interest in leading activities, and the application of their experience in furthering their own careers and aspirations. Since the program's inception, Youth Council Executives have used their experience in the program for employment and post-secondary school applications. This has led to Youth Council Executives securing jobs with Credit Valley Conservation, Nature Conservancy Canada, and even TRCA. Youth Council Executives have been accepted into graduate programs at York University and in an effort to recognize the hard work of the Executive volunteers, TRCA continues to identify opportunities to nominate members for relevant awards. For example, in 2021 Wai Ying Lam was awarded Water Canada's 2021 Water's Next Award in the Young Professional category.

While the program has seen much success in meeting goals and objectives, after undertaking a program evaluation process, the following is a summary of the recommendations for program improvement:

- Continue online program delivery, and/or consider a hybrid approach as restrictions allow
- Consider new methods of network building, such as LinkedIn or tapping into existing youth networks through TRCA's municipal partners
- Continue efforts to broaden the recruitment of the Youth Council to include more members from diverse communities through more deliberate recruitment strategies with different groups/agencies who work in target communities.
- Continue to find synergies between TRCA's work and strategic goals/priorities and the work of the Youth Council, as is being undertaken as part of the Research Project.
- Identify how to build stronger connections between the Executive and General Membership in order to better involve the General Membership in the development of Youth Council initiatives, where appropriate.
- Consider soliciting testimonials from previous Youth Council Executive members to use for promotion of the program

Relationship to Building the Living City, the TRCA 2013-2022 Strategic Plan

This report supports the following strategies set forth in the TRCA 2013-2022 Strategic Plan:

Strategy 5 – Foster sustainable citizenship

Strategy 7 – Build partnerships and new business models

FINANCIAL DETAILS

Funds are available in TRCA Government and Community Relations program accounts for watershed engagement and community projects to support the Youth Council recruitment process, as well as support Youth Council initiatives. Staff work with the Regional Watershed Alliance Youth Council Working Group and with the Youth Council itself to ensure that the scope of work reflects available budget and staff support

DETAILS OF WORK TO BE DONE

- Revise program recruitment and delivery to align with recommendations in Attachment 1
- Develop Youth Council-specific Terms of Reference that align with the RWA Terms of Reference

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Date: February 9, 2022

Attachments: 1

Attachment 1: 2021-2022 TRCA Youth Council Annual Report