




CITY OF HAMILTON
PUBLIC WORKS DEPARTMENT
Environmental Services Division

TO:	Chair and Members Public Works Committee
COMMITTEE DATE:	October 15, 2024
SUBJECT/REPORT NO:	Service Level Change for Hanging Basket Program (PW24064) (City Wide)
WARD(S) AFFECTED:	City Wide
PREPARED BY:	Robyn Pollard (905) 546-2424 Ext. 3919
SUBMITTED BY:	Cynthia Graham Director, Environmental Services Public Works Department
SIGNATURE:	

RECOMMENDATION

- (a) That the City of Hamilton's Hanging Basket Program, identified in Report PW24064, be paused for the entirety of the 2025 season;
- (b) That the City of Hamilton's Horticultural Section complete a full review of the Hanging Basket Program, identified in Report PW24064, to address safety concerns, identify resource efficiencies, and increase alignment with the City of Hamilton Biodiversity Action Plan and Climate Action Strategy;
- (c) That the staff review include the review of relevant existing Business Improvement Area (BIA) agreements to standardize services and costs;
- (d) That the Hanging Basket Program budget for contracted services, allocated to the Environmental Services Division - Forestry and Horticulture Section operating budget, Dept ID 446021 - 55916 - Enhanced Streetscaping, \$145,400, be identified as a one-time cost-savings for the 2025 Budget; and
- (e) That staff report back with a summary of recommendations (b) and (c) in Report PW24064 and provide recommendations for the future administration of the City of Hamilton's Hanging Basket Program identified in Report PW24064.

OUR Vision: To be the best place to raise a child and age successfully.

OUR Mission: To provide high quality cost conscious public services that contribute to a healthy, safe and prosperous community, in a sustainable manner.

OUR Culture: Collective Ownership, Steadfast Integrity, Courageous Change, Sensational Service, Engaged Empowered Employees.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Forestry and Horticulture Section, within the Environmental Services Division, administers an annual Hanging Basket program, which enhances the beauty of the City's urban landscapes with floral hanging baskets from late May through September. These baskets are placed in Business Improvement Areas (BIAs), along busy streetscapes, in parks such as Gore Park, and at civic properties like City Hall.

Hanging baskets are primarily grown, installed, and watered by a contracted vendor awarded through a competitive procurement process, and to a lesser extent through the Gage Park Production Greenhouse, which is operated by the Horticulture Section. Operating and maintenance expenses related to this program are funded through the Forestry and Horticulture operating budget, specifically 446021 – Enhanced Streetscaping. Capital expenses, including the initial purchase of brackets and baskets, have historically been included within the scope of development projects. Additionally, some Business Improvement Areas (BIAs) have purchased, installed, and maintained hanging baskets outside of this program.

In preparation for awarding a new contract for the 2025 season, staff began a preliminary review of the current program. Concerns raised highlighted the unequal distribution of services across different City areas, inconsistencies in bracket installation design and inspection, and the need to align with Council priorities and objectives, such as Bee City status, biodiversity goals, and climate change adaptation and mitigation efforts. Report PW24064 has been prepared to address these initial concerns. In consideration of the financial challenges in the 2025 tax budget cycle, and to give an opportunity to do a fulsome review with all of the stated City goals in mind, staff prepared Report PW24064, recommending a pause in the program until a comprehensive review could be completed. This pause would be considered a service level change in 2025 and the corresponding budget relating to this program could be reduced and added as a budget efficiency in the 2025 Tax Operating Budget process.

Alternatives for Consideration – See Page 8

FINANCIAL – STAFFING – LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

Financial: The total amount of work issued to the contractor was \$145,400, which represents the budget for the 2024 season. This is an opportunity for cost savings in 2025. The recommendations of Report PW24064 are for a one-year pause, which means that these funds would be planned for 2026, understanding that a subsequent staff report may recommend further adjustments to the program and funding.

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Staffing: The administration of the City of Hamilton's Hanging Basket program, as outlined in Report PW24064, is primarily managed by the Horticulture Design Supervisor and the Horticulture Superintendent. Additionally, the Horticulture Greenhouse Supervisor, along with Gardeners and Landscapers, contribute by growing and watering approximately 30% of the hanging baskets each year. These staff are involved in other aspects of Horticulture, therefore, approval of the recommendations within Report PW24064 would not provide any savings related to staffing. However, staffing involved in the management of the program would be freed up to perform the full review, and staff involved in the maintenance of the baskets would be assigned to duties which are under-resourced. These tasks may include perennial bed maintenance and conversion of annual beds to perennial beds.

Legal: Each Business Improvement Area (BIA) agreement is expected to be updated to reflect the revised services. For the 2025 season, the service pause may need to be included in interim Business Improvement Area (BIA) agreements, requiring Legal support.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The mandate of the City of Hamilton's Horticultural section is to beautify the City's urban landscapes through horticultural excellence. In keeping with that mandate, the Forestry and Horticulture section manage the Hanging Basket Program. These baskets can be seen in Business Improvement Areas (BIAs), busy streetscapes, parks, and prominent civic properties.

In recent years, the Horticulture staff have begun reviewing plant lists and horticultural practices to reduce watering needs across City programs. Implemented changes include the installation of compost and mulch in garden beds to increase soil water retention, and the use of more drought resistant plants. Further to this, staff are reviewing ways to decrease the use of annuals which require significantly more water to grow and maintain when compared to drought resistant perennials.

The inventory of hanging baskets installed and maintained by Forestry and Horticulture for the 2024 program was 701. Of this total, 265 were grown by staff in the Gage Park Production Greenhouse, and the remaining 436 were grown and supplied by a contracted vendor. This vendor was contracted to water the hanging baskets they supplied as well as some supplied by individual Business Improvement Areas (BIAs), and the Gage Park Production Greenhouse, totalling 471 baskets in 2024. Staff water the remaining 230 baskets.

The Hanging Basket Supply, Install, Maintain, and Remove contract, C11-58-19, was awarded as a multi-year tender, renewed for 5 terms from 2020 to 2024. Due to the

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cyber incident, the total expenses related to the contract for 2023 were not available at the time of preparing this report; however, the total amount issued against the purchase order for 2024 was \$145,400, which provides a good indication of the 2024 program cost.

In preparation for tendering a new contract, staff began reviewing the successes and opportunities to improve services and noted several concerns. Most notable, and the rationale for preparing Report PW24064, were the concerns that the program itself is not aligned with Council priorities because of the fuel and water use required, as well as an identified need to create a bracket inspection program to ensure safety.

The lack of formal inspection of brackets, in conjunction with the lack of bracket manufacturer documentation, was identified by management as enough of a health and safety risk to cause concern, and therefore the recommendations of Report PW24064 are to pause the program until a comprehensive review can be completed. This pause would be considered a service level change in 2025.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND LEGISLATED REQUIREMENTS

There is no legislation around the inspection of hanging baskets. However, assets should be inspected regularly to ensure they are installed as per manufacturers specifications and free from defects which could pose a risk to the public.

RELEVANT CONSULTATION

Staff reached out to several municipalities to discuss their hanging basket programs. While these consultations were valuable, there was little consistency in the programs.

2024 Preliminary Hanging Basket Review – Municipal Summary	
Municipality	Notes
City of Vaughan	No response received
City of Toronto	Provided link to Banner Permit Program which includes flower baskets
City of Mississauga	Provided details on types of planters, brackets, and installation process
City of Burlington	No response received
Regional Municipality of Niagara	Provided details on brackets and inspection process
City of Cambridge	Provided minimal details, noted no formal inspection program
City of Kitchener	No response received
City of Brantford	Noted their downtown beautification is under review

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Haldimand County	Provided minimal details, noted the program differs for each area
City of Guelph	Provided minimal details, noted the use of Electrical Utility Contractor as the installer

ANALYSIS AND RATIONALE FOR RECOMMENDATION

Report PW24064 stemmed from concerns raised during the initial review in preparation for awarding a new contract for the 2025 season. Concerns are defined as follows to provide the rationale for the recommendations in Report PW24064.

Contract Management

The existing contract does not include specifications for the inspection of existing brackets before installing a hanging basket, so although it is assumed that a visual inspection is completed, there is no formalized inspection documentation.

The existing contract language has poorly defined the schedule of watering baskets, leaving the decision to water to the contractor rather than the project manager, which may have led to increased watering costs and inefficiencies.

The existing contract has allowed the contractor to work outside of regular working hours to increase efficiency and reduce the disruption to traffic flow of a large vehicle stopping frequently to water. This means that to ensure contractor oversight, overtime is required for the project manager.

Unfortunately, throughout the current contract, the contractor has reported several incidents where their staff, who work late at night to reduce traffic disruptions, have felt unsafe, have been harassed, or experienced assaults.

Current staff resources are focused on summer activities, budgets, and current workplan items, which means that a program review could not be accommodated until late October. Waiting for the review results and incorporating changes into a new tender will require time, specifically the need to develop contract specifications to inspect brackets. To ensure the installation of hanging baskets by the end of May, the program historically awards the contracted services by the end of November for the following season, to allow the contracted vendor to plan and execute the supply of the required hanging baskets for the upcoming season. The current turnaround time from approvals to proceed with a tender to award and issuing a purchase order to the successful vendor is about eleven weeks, but this doesn't account for current workloads and competing priorities. Therefore, staff would have to set aside other tasks to free up the time to review, revise, submit, and award a new contract for the 2025 season. This, in

addition to the staff effort required to complete the review, has informed the recommendation of Report PW24064 for a one year pause of the program.

Asset Management

As asset management practices have matured, staff have worked to ensure inventories are kept up to date. In 2024, staff began collecting inventory data for all hanging baskets and brackets. During the collection of data, staff noted concerns including a significant number of brackets showing rust, baskets installed in locations where they provided little value or blocked street signage, there were 11 types of brackets, and no record of manufacturer documentation defining rated weight limit or installation guidelines. Hanging baskets can weigh 27 to 34 kilograms, or 60 to 75 pounds, and are located in heavily trafficked areas. Verification of installation as per manufacturer's specifications is required, as well as regular inspections, to ensure brackets are free of defects which could pose a risk. Horticulture staff lack the training required for bracket inspections. As a result, support from another City of Hamilton department, in-house training, or hiring a contractor will be necessary to complete this task.

Alignment with City of Hamilton Strategies

Approved in August 2022, Hamilton's Climate Action Strategy enhances the City's response to the Climate Change Emergency Declaration by prioritizing climate mitigation and actions aimed at reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

Approved in June 2024, Hamilton's Biodiversity Action Plan advances the City's response to declining biodiversity and aims to protect, enhance, and restore biodiversity in Hamilton.

In February 2021, Hamilton became designated as a Bee City. This designation recognizes Hamilton's efforts to protect pollinators, including a commitment to create new pollinator habitat, provide education, and community outreach opportunities.

The 2022 - 2026 Council Priorities include specific relevant priorities, including Priority 1 Outcome 1, related to finding efficiencies, and Priority 1 Outcome 3, related to reduction in greenhouse gas emissions.

Staff should work to align with these strategies to act as leaders in the community. The current administration of the Hanging Basket Program is out of alignment with these strategies, as described below.

Plant Selection: Plants selected for hanging baskets are non-native plants with no environmental benefits. They are greenhouse grown and disposed of at the end of the

growing season. A transition to a program that can support plants that provide ecological benefit would better align with the strategies and goals.

Fertilizer and Pesticides: Commercial nurseries often grow annuals with conventional fertilizer and pesticide programs to enhance plant growth and reduce pests. Although these are regulated to limit health and safety risks to growers and the environment, they are still resource-heavy when compared to the growing of perennials because an annual is disposed of at the end of the growing season, whereas a perennial can survive for a long time. Additionally, due to the limited soil volume within a hanging basket, repeated fertilization applications can be required to enhance blooms throughout the season.

Watering: Hanging baskets with limited soil volume requires regular watering applications to keep plants alive and thriving. All baskets are watered from June 1st to Sept 30th. Baskets are watered every other day, or during prolonged heat, every day, which equates to 60 to 120 applications per hanging basket. In comparison, floral planters are watered weekly due to their water retention design and increased soil volume, equating to about 18 waterings.

Greenhouse Gas Emissions: Emissions are related to the use of large vehicles and equipment to water hanging baskets. For example, the vehicles currently used are large diesel trucks with gasoline powered water pumps. If 700 hanging baskets need to be watered 60 to 120 times per season, a vehicle needs to drive to them that many times. Additionally, each basket needs to be delivered, installed, and removed. A transition to a program that can reduce this greenhouse gas burden will better align with the strategies and goals outlined.

Program Costs

Historical reviews have estimated the contracted cost to grow, install, water, and dispose of one hanging basket to be about \$310 annually. The cost for internally maintained hanging baskets is higher which is why the program has transitioned to be primarily contracted. The annual unit cost of \$310 is based on the successful bidder's unit price from 2020 for the first term of the current contract with no annual increase. Therefore, based on inflation over the past 5 years, staff estimate the current cost of each basket to be \$341. Staff anticipate a new contract to cost between \$217,310 and \$239,041, if all hanging baskets were grown, installed, and maintained by a contracted vendor.

The individual Business Improvement Areas (BIAs), have agreements which in some cases, but not all, include cost recoveries for services provided by Horticulture. Because of the inconsistencies and desire for transparency, the recommendations of Report

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PW24064 includes a review of each agreement is required to better define the program costs incurred.

Program Scope

The purpose of hanging baskets is not clearly defined, resulting in inconsistencies across the city. As an example, most of the hanging baskets are located in Business Improvement Areas (BIAs), with no consistent funding approach, and some areas benefit more than others by utilizing the Forestry and Horticulture operating budget. For example, the agreement with the Ancaster Village Business Improvement Area included historical terms for some baskets that were provided at no charge back to them, meaning the Forestry and Horticulture operating budget covered the remainder. Another example is the Downtown Hamilton Business Improvement Area, where 17 hanging baskets were installed in 2024 along King William Street, all of which were funded by the Forestry and Horticulture operating budget. Lastly, the Stoney Creek Village Business Improvement Area administers their program with no use of Horticulture's services or budget.

Outside of Business Improvement Areas (BIAs), there is no clear standard for where hanging baskets could be utilized. The locations range from high-profile parks like Gore Park, to municipal properties to streetscapes, but there are no clear guidelines for where hanging baskets should be utilized.

Hanging baskets are intended to provide colour and aesthetics in the urban landscape, therefore the program review should look at all options and compare initial and ongoing expenses. This comparison would allow the City to move forward with a cost-effective option that provides the intended benefits and better aligns with Hamilton's strategies and goals.

ALTERNATIVES FOR CONSIDERATION

An alternative to recommendation (d) in Report PW24064 would be to direct staff to work with each Business Improvement Area (BIA) to create agreements that transfer all costs and liabilities to the respective areas. This approach would enable those areas that depend on the City to continue using city infrastructure for hanging floral baskets if they wish. As this would not address the possible risk associated with the bracket inspections, and would require some staff effort to execute the agreements, and would lead to additional inconsistencies in beautification across the city, staff do not recommend this alternative.

Financial: This option would not affect the financial impacts as outlined in Report PW24064.

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Staffing: This option would not affect staffing impacts as outlined in Report PW24064.

Legal: No impact.

APPENDICES AND SCHEDULES ATTACHED

N/A