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REPORT TITLE: **Residential Rat Control Subsidy Pilot Program**

FROM: Kealy Dedman, Commissioner of Public Works

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## **RECOMMENDATION**

**That the Residential Rat Control Subsidy Pilot Program transition to an education and outreach program beyond the initial pilot stage, as described in the report of the Commissioner of Public Works listed on the March 24, 2022 Regional Council agenda titled “Residential Rat Control Subsidy Pilot Program”, be approved.**

## **REPORT HIGHLIGHTS**

- On October 8, 2020 Council passed Resolution 2020-812 approving a 12-month residential Rat Control Rebate Pilot Program and a rodent abatement program on construction sites.
  - The Residential Rat Control Subsidy Pilot Program was launched in March 2021.
  - Proactive pest control measures have been implemented on Regional water and wastewater construction sites, and pest control measures are becoming a standard inclusion for project tenders in Public Works. Staff will continue to look for opportunities to expand pest control standards to other Regional construction projects.
  - The pilot program findings demonstrate low community uptake of the subsidy, with 319 applicants despite extensive communication efforts. The low resident uptake relative to the financial and resource investment does not warrant the continuation of the subsidy program. Continuation of the subsidy could also be precedent setting to introduce a similar program for other rodents or pests.
  - Transitioning the Residential Rat Control Subsidy Pilot program to an education and outreach program, ongoing rodent abatement at construction sites, and regular monitoring of rat complaints and inquiries are expected to address community needs.
  - To support the recommended education and outreach program, an operating budget of \$140,000 is required, which includes the addition of one full-time equivalent and \$30,000 in promotion and education materials.
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## **DISCUSSION**

### **1. Background**

Rats are common pests in the urban environment and, like most pests, can be considered a nuisance to members of the community. While rats may carry ticks, fleas, and spread diseases, the risk of disease transmission in the community is low. Publications cite that rats may have temporarily relocated from commercial to residential neighbourhoods due to COVID-19 and previous lockdown measures that disrupted their

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normal food sources; however, the overall number of complaints and rat sightings in Peel remain low.

Community concerns over increased rat activity within neighbourhoods were raised at the September 10, 2020 Regional Council meeting. Following the delegation, Region of Peel staff was directed to report back at a future meeting of Regional Council with recommendations detailing a rat control program (Resolution 2020-704). The Pest Control Subsidy Framework and Study report was presented to Council on October 8, 2020, which included financial feasibility, a jurisdictional scan and other program information for Council's consideration including details on Integrated Pest Management (IPM) and subsidy options. As discussed at the October 8, 2020 Regional Council meeting, an IPM approach is crucial to control rat populations.

The five steps of IPM are as follows:

1. Identify concerns through community engagement (action threshold)
2. Clean properties (eliminate food)
3. Eliminate entry points
4. Non-chemical controls (traps)
5. Chemical treatment (pesticides)

The key to the success of IPM is working with the community to understand the need and to provide education on how to eliminate conditions that attract rats.

Following the discussion, Regional Council approved the October 8, 2020 staff report (Resolution 2020-812), with the following modifications which reads in part:

- Peel implement an interim residential subsidy program by providing 50 percent of the incurred costs for the services of a registered professional pest control service to a maximum of \$200 per property per year with appropriate invoices submitted with a proposed pilot budget of up to \$500,000;
- A residential rebate program be piloted for 12 months;
- Budget be allocated as follows:
  - \$225,000 for the rebate program
  - \$198,000 for IPM resources and waste management support
  - \$75,000 for a construction rat abatement program

## **2. Implementation**

### **a) Residential Rat Control Subsidy Pilot Program**

Prior to implementing the Residential Rat Control Subsidy Pilot Program (the Pilot Program), the Region launched an Interim Residential Rat Control Subsidy Program to address rat abatement work already completed by residents. This program provided a subsidy of up to \$200 for residents who completed an application and provided receipts for rat traps/bait or professional rat control services purchased between June 1, 2020 and March 22, 2021. One hundred twenty-four (124) residents participated in the program, resulting in a total of \$20,500 in subsidy payments with an average of \$146 claimed per household. This program ended on March 22, 2021 and was replaced by the Residential Rat Control Subsidy Pilot Program.

The one-year Pilot Program was launched on March 22, 2021. The Pilot Program was available to residents in residential detached, semi-detached, duplex, or triplex properties for rat abatement services on the exterior of the property only. Under the pilot,

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eligible residents could receive a subsidy for 50 percent of the total cost, up to a maximum of \$200, for exterior rat control services performed by a Region of Peel approved vendor. Approved vendors were selected through a competitive Request for Tender (RFT) process to ensure proper licensing and favorable service costs for program participants. Additionally, vendors were required to follow an IPM approach, including an inspection process, providing education, and following guidelines set out by the Region. The use of approved vendors was selected over do-it-yourself baits and traps to ensure rat abatement was conducted safely and correctly, and to enable resident education on prevention. As a quality control measure, Regional staff performed random site inspections.

To support residents interested in proactive rat control measures, as well as those currently experiencing rat issues, education and outreach was implemented as an important part of the IPM approach. This strong focus on prevention and educating the community on how to help keep rats off of their properties is the foundation of IPM and an effective way to control rat populations over time. Preventative messaging focused on controlling rat populations naturally, without the use of chemical intervention, through elimination of sources of food, water, and shelter. These messages were the foundation for educational materials that were distributed through online and print communication channels. The Region is partnering with the local municipalities to distribute these messages and educational resources through their property standards teams. Pilot program participants were provided more detailed education on prevention throughout the treatment process.

### **b) Communications**

An extensive range of communication tactics were used throughout the pilot program to create widespread community awareness of the subsidy and to enable evaluation of community demand. Communication tactics included social media posts, digital advertising, Councillor newsletters, the Connect to Peel electronic newsletter, water bill inserts and print ads in the local papers. A detailed overview of the communications and reach metrics is outlined in Appendix II.

## **3. Findings**

### **a) Community Demand for Subsidy**

Participation in the Pilot Program was low (319 residents) despite the extensive communication and advertising tactics deployed. The 319 residents account for 28 percent of the 1,125 participants that were expected to participate in the program when Council established the \$225,000 subsidy budget. These results demonstrate the community demand for a subsidy is low relative to the expectation of Council at the time.

### **b) Program Monitoring and Feedback**

Pilot Program participation and inquiries about rats were continuously monitored and mapped to identify geographic trends. This monitoring did not identify any neighbourhood hot spots for rat activity.

Although no hot spots were identified, neighbourhoods with the highest program uptake (see Appendix I for program participation by ward) were targeted using additional education and outreach tactics. In these areas, staff observed 790 homes with improper waste setouts and delivered educational brochures to these homes on proper waste set outs and preventative pest control measures. The goal of this outreach was to educate and shift behaviours that may contribute to rat habitats. Similar educational resources

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were also developed for businesses, rental complexes, and condominium properties throughout Peel.

To gather feedback and monitor resident satisfaction, program participants were provided an online survey asking about overall program satisfaction, rat prevention knowledge, and vendor performance. One hundred fourteen (114) surveys were completed with 93 percent of respondents expressing satisfaction with the overall program. In addition, 92 percent of respondents found it helpful to have an approved vendor and found the average cost of service (\$167) to be reasonable. The survey also asked residents about their knowledge of rat prevention. Only 41 percent of respondents indicated that they had knowledge of how to prevent rat infestations on their property before participating in the pilot program. This number increased to 79 percent after pilot program participation. These results demonstrate the effectiveness of education in IPM and the positive impact that education has on rat prevention.

Over the course of the pilot program, staff collected general feedback from members of the community through email and phone. Fifty-three (53) program complaints were received, with the majority of complaints resulting from residents wanting to use their own vendors. However, once residents hired a Peel approved vendor, 88 percent of survey respondents expressed satisfaction with their work.

Random site inspections were conducted by Regional staff as a quality control measure to ensure that any sources of food, water, and shelter for rats were addressed and that baits and traps were set out correctly by the vendors. The inspections indicated that residents were addressing contributing factors by cleaning up their properties, and that the vendors were performing the services as expected.

### c) Program Cost

Table 1 outlines the Pilot Program cost, including development and operation.

**Table 1: Pilot Program Cost Summary**

<b>Council Approved Pilot program budget</b>	<b>\$ 500,000</b>
<b>Program Development Cost Estimate</b>	
Staffing (1 FTE)	\$ 100,000
Consultants	\$ 5,000
<b>Total Development Cost</b>	<b>\$ 105,000</b>
<b>Program Operational Costs</b>	
Staffing (1.5 FTE)	\$ 150,000
Communications, promotion, and education materials	\$ 26,800
Interim Program - Subsidy Payments	\$ 20,500
Pilot Program – Subsidy Payments	\$27,700
<b>Total Operational Cost</b>	<b>\$ 225,000</b>
<b>Overall</b>	
<b>Total Budget Spent</b>	<b>\$ 330,000</b>
<b>Budget Remaining</b>	<b>\$170,000</b>

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The pilot program was delivered by leveraging existing staff resources which were only made available from the pause of programs due to COVID-19. As the Region recovers from COVID-19, any continued delivery of a rat control program would require additional resources to administer. Based on these findings, delivery of a subsidy program is resource intensive and, when uptake is low, can be cost prohibitive.

### **d) Rodent Abatement for Construction**

Complaints about rats and pests related to construction sites were monitored between January 1, 2021 and March 4, 2022. During this time, five complaints were received about rats within Regional construction zones.

Proactive pest control measures have been implemented at over 30 Regional water and wastewater construction projects. Measures include preconstruction site assessment, daily site cleanup, daily waste disposal, baits and traps throughout the site, and weekly inspections performed by the pest control vendor. Staff work with the onsite contractor to ensure monitoring and treatment is performed. A pest control specification was developed and is being incorporated in construction project tenders across Public Works. Staff will continue to look for opportunities to expand pest control to other Regional construction projects.

## **4. Proposed Direction**

Table 2 outlines four future program options for Council's consideration, including the recommended option (Option 2). All options include continuation of the construction rodent abatement program.

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**Table 2: Program Options for Consideration**

Option	Details	Financial Implications	Resource Requirement
Option 1 - End program	Cease all subsidy and education and outreach support for rat control in the community.	No financial implications	None
<b>Option 2 - Provide enhanced education and outreach</b>  <b>(Recommended)</b>	<p>Continue to support the community utilizing IPM principles through deploying a variety of education and outreach tactics. These tactics will be developed following council approval and will include but not be limited to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Online and print communications</li> <li>▪ Town halls or community education events</li> <li>▪ Neighbourhood education flyer deliveries</li> <li>▪ Attendance at community events</li> <li>▪ Partnership development with industry and associations</li> <li>▪ Working groups with key stakeholders including local municipalities, Public Health, Peel Housing and Waste Management</li> <li>▪ Supporting businesses with improving prevention and controls</li> <li>▪ Supporting property managers and residents at multi-residential properties and condominiums with education</li> <li>▪ Internal collaboration to support Regional sites</li> </ul> <p>By providing enhanced education to the entire community focused on prevention, Peel will be more resilient against rat infestations and increases the ability to successfully control populations over time. Rat complaints and inquiries will continue to be monitored and responded to.</p>	\$140,000 annually (Operating)	1.0 FTE staff, promotion, and education material costs
Option 3 - Full program (Enhanced education and outreach AND Subsidy)	A full rat control program would include annual operation of a rat control subsidy program and enhanced education and outreach as outlined in option 2.	\$285,000 annually (Operating) Assumes program participation is consistent with pilot year.	2.0 FTE staff, rebate budget and promotion, and education material costs
Option 4 - Extend pilot program for one additional year	Extend the pilot program, in its current format, which would enable staff to deliver focused education and administer the subsidy program. Staff will continue monitoring the subsidy program demand in the event that the community focus on COVID-19 posed as a distraction to resident participation. The extension would help provide a better understanding of the community need before discontinuing support (option 1) or committing the Region to a rat control program as outlined in options 2 and 3.	\$220,000 One year only Assumes program participation is consistent with pilot year.	1.5 contract staff, rebate budget and promotion costs

## **Residential Rat Control Subsidy Pilot Program**

Due to the low program uptake and the demonstrated benefits of education in IPM, staff recommend Option 2; ending the subsidy component of the program and instead focusing efforts on community-wide rat prevention education and continued proactive rat abatement at Regional construction sites and facilities.

Education and outreach tactics would focus on proactive measures to prevent rat infestations in addition to teaching proper controls for residents currently experiencing infestations. This type of education program aligns with IPM best practices by focusing on providing residents and businesses with the knowledge to prevent rats in their community. Delivering an education program focused on steps 1-3 (prevention) reduces the need for residents to deploy physical or chemical treatments (steps 4 and 5).

Given the low participation in the Residential Rat Control Subsidy Pilot Program, an education approach would be more commensurate with the magnitude of the current rat issue in the Region. It would also address the needs of a wider audience by providing rat control information to multiple groups and addresses the larger issue of rats moving around as they search out food, water, and shelter in residential or business areas. This approach aligns with the overall goal of IPM by keeping pest levels below an economically damaging level while minimizing impacts on humans and the environment.

These education efforts on rat prevention are more extensive than what is currently provided by the local municipalities on pest and wildlife control and would be delivered in a way that complements municipal messaging. It should also be noted that no other subsidy program exists for controlling other pests or wildlife in the Region.

Staff will continue to monitor the effectiveness of the program and collect feedback. In the event that monitoring and community feedback demonstrates a significant shift in rat related complaints, staff will report back to Council with a recommendation to scale up education efforts and/or add a subsidy component back into the program.

## **RISK CONSIDERATIONS**

The overall risk to the Region of switching from a subsidy to education and outreach program is low, given the minimal community demand for the subsidy. If the impact of rats in the community is bigger than the data demonstrates, staff will adapt the program to meet evolving community needs.

## **FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

As the pilot program ends in March 2022, staff are requesting an increase of \$105,000 to implement Option 2 (recommended) until the end of 2022 and be funded from the Tax Rate Stabilization Reserve.

To operationalize Option 2 beyond 2022, a budget increase of \$140,000 comprised of 1.0 FTE and educational and promotional materials to support the ongoing education and outreach program will be included as part of the 2023 Budget.

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### **CONCLUSION**

The Region of Peel implemented the Residential Rat Control Subsidy Pilot Program on March 22, 2021 that included a subsidy, education, outreach, communications, monitoring of complaints and inquiries, and rodent abatement at construction sites. The Pilot Program findings conclude that health concerns, rat sightings and complaints all remain low and there is minimal community demand for the subsidy. The low resident uptake relative to the financial and resource investment does not warrant the continuation of the subsidy program. Continuation of the subsidy could also be precedent setting to introduce a similar program for other rodents or pests. Based on these findings, staff recommend that Regional Council approve the modification of the Residential Rat Control Subsidy Pilot Program to an education and outreach program beyond the initial pilot stage set to end March 31, 2022.

### **APPENDICES**

Appendix I - Applications Processed by Ward

Appendix II – Detailed Overview Communications and Reach Metrics

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