

East Humber Trail

Grassroots Involvement Sparks New Directions in Trail Design



**Nomination Submission:
OALA Award for Service to the Environment**

To: The Honours Awards and Protocols Committee, OALA

Re: Nomination for the OALA Award for Service to the Environment

Nominator: Geoff Hunt, OALA

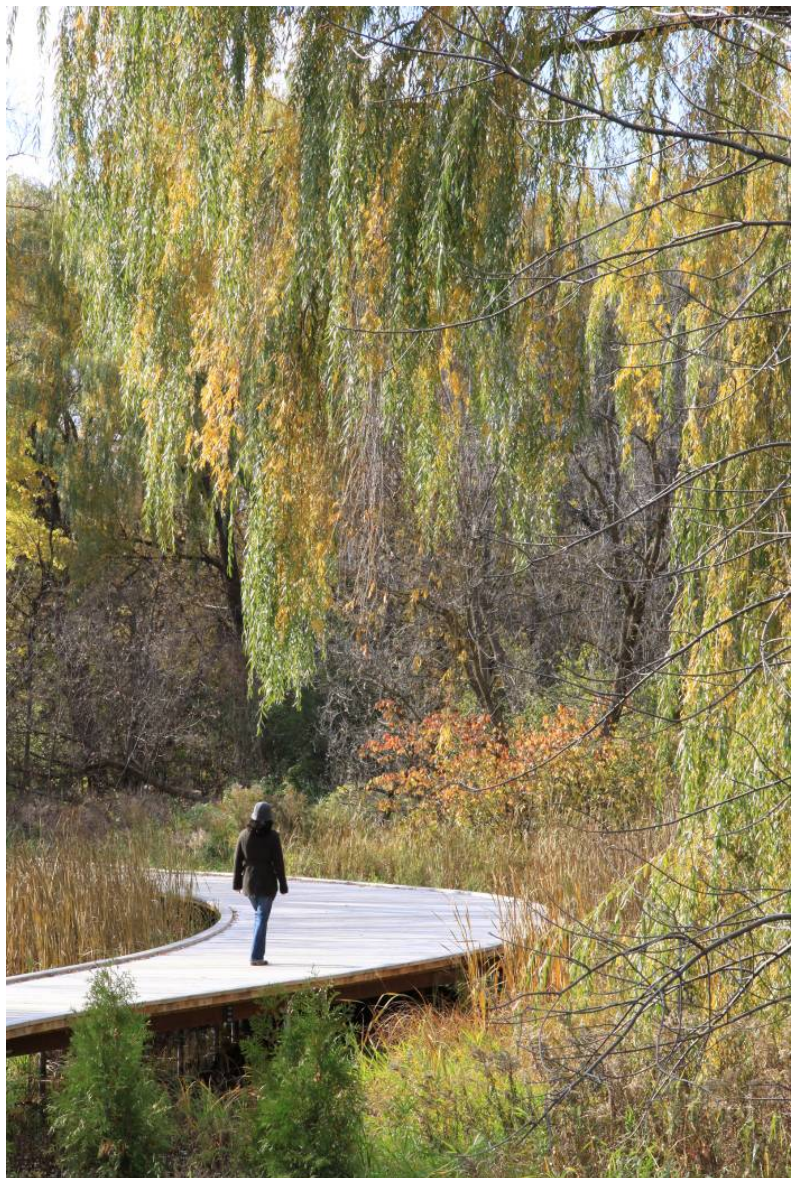
Nominees: the Oaks Ridges Friends of the Environment and York Region Environmental Alliance in partnership with the Town of Richmond Hill

To recognize the special and unusual contribution to the sensitive, sustainable design for human use of the environment in the design of the **East Humber Trail**, a project that has made local and regional impact through policy, planning, design, and implementation.

Project Background:

The East Humber Trail is a 2 km long network of trails, boardwalks and pedestrian bridges that weave through 21.6 ha of woodland, meadows and wetlands. It crosses the East Humber River several times as it leads trail users through various landscape typologies and spatial experiences. Surrounded by suburban residential development, the site provides vital storm water retention and habitat for local wildlife as well as an important recreational amenity for joggers, walkers, and nature lovers.

The lands surrounding the trail are comprised of old fields in various stages of succession, with some extensive woody vegetation, as well as forested areas ranging from early successional to mature mixed forests. The trail also passes through wetland/wet meadow communities that are located within the floodplain of the East Humber River. These lands provide a diversity of habitats for many wildlife species, particularly birds, including the Black-Billed Cuckoo, Yellow-Billed Cuckoo, Ring-Necked Pheasant and Red-Breasted Nuthatch, which are all uncommon in the Greater Toronto Area.



For decades, the site lacked a formalized trail system. As development filled in around the site, residents trickled in haphazardly carving multiple footpaths, trampling the vegetation and deteriorating sensitive habitat zones.

The new trail system encourages trail users to limit their circulation to the prescribed path, allowing the remainder of the site to naturalize and remain protected from human traffic.

The path itself treads lightly through the site: the boardwalks are built on helical piers and many sections of the trail are comprised of limestone screenings and woodchip surfacing.

There is a cluster of bat boxes located in the western portion of the trail and only native and non-invasive species were used in the new plantings which provide food and shelter for local wildlife.



The boardwalks built on helical piers tread lightly through the wetlands



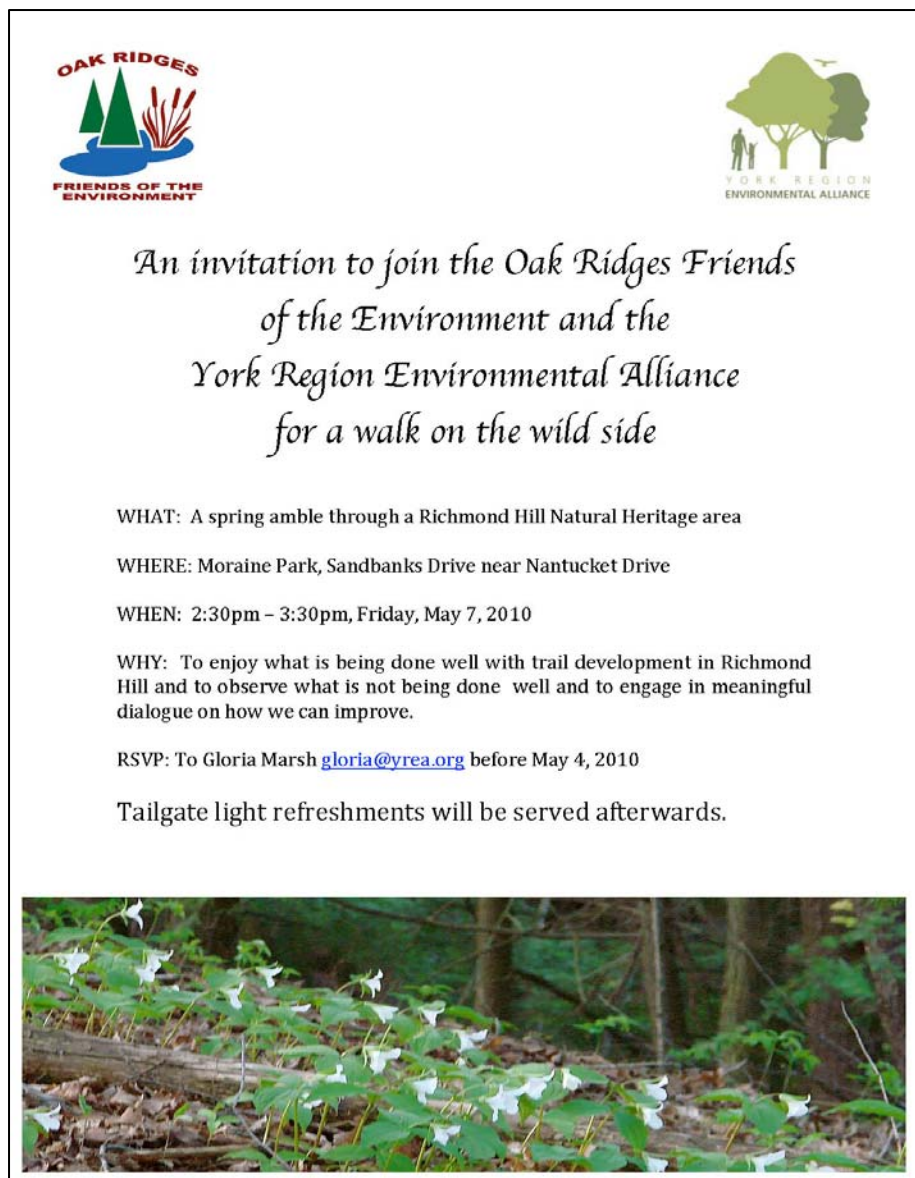
A cluster of bat boxes provides habitat while creating a vertical focal point in a wetland meadow

Public Involvement:

In Spring of 2010, two local grass roots organizations, Oaks Ridges Friends of the Environment (ORFE) and York Region Environmental Alliance (YREA), invited the Town of Richmond Hill's park planners, Natural Heritage staff, landscape architects, commissioners, and local and regional councilors to join them in a walk through some newly completed trails. Their goal was to spark a conversation about the adopted town standards for trail design, which was a 2.4 meter wide asphalt pathway and not much else.

They requested that the town consider providing different trail types which would include narrowing the path to 1.2 meters in some sections and using stone screenings or wood mulch surfacing, wherever possible. This was not only for the environmental benefits, but more importantly, to enhance the user experience. Asphalt paving, they argued, was a harsh, unnatural, urban material. A nature trail is where one goes to escape the urban realm and reconnect with the natural environment. The asphalt paths that had become the design standard throughout the town simply did not provide the quality or variety of sensory experiences one seeks when embarking on a hike in the woods.

Their comments were heard loud and clear. At the time that this organized walk occurred, the East Humber Trail project was in the design development phase. The general layout and material selection (more asphalt) had already been approved. The project was put on hold while the town's park planners, landscape architects and senior staff discussed changing directions on this and all future trail projects. While the old standard of monotonous asphalt paving maximized accessibility and minimized maintenance issues, a new standard needed to take into consideration the issues that these grass roots organizations brought to light.



Above: The invitation that was sent out to key Town of Richmond Hill staff

When design work on the trail started up again, there was a greater emphasis put on high quality design and more attention paid to the user experience. The ORFE and YREA were involved at public open houses to comment on the new plan as it developed.

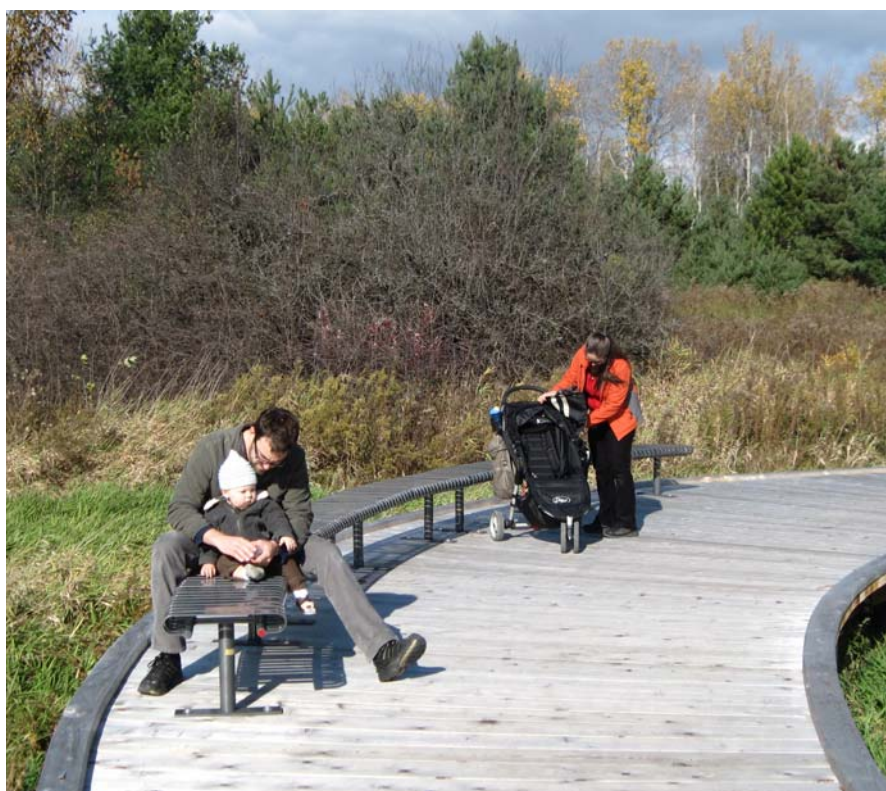
The final design includes a variety of natural walking surfaces and curvaceous boardwalks graced with custom curved benches. The standard railings along the sides of the boardwalk were eliminated in favour of a more subtle wooden curb, allowing unobstructed views and a greater connection to the wetland surroundings. There are also numerous artistic details, such as custom panels on the pedestrian bridges which showcase native plant species found along the trail.

Since the project's completion, the ORFE and YREA have been instrumental in promoting the trail and advocating for similar design strategies to be implemented throughout the region.

This encounter between the ORFE, YREA and Town staff had a drastic influence on the decision making that shaped the design of this trail, and many others that will follow. It demonstrates the mission of the OALA in promoting public outreach and collaboration in policy making, design and implementation. The end result is a high quality, artistic and experientially rich trail which is beloved by the local residents and visitors alike.



A local walking club enjoys the variety of natural surfaces that the trail offers.



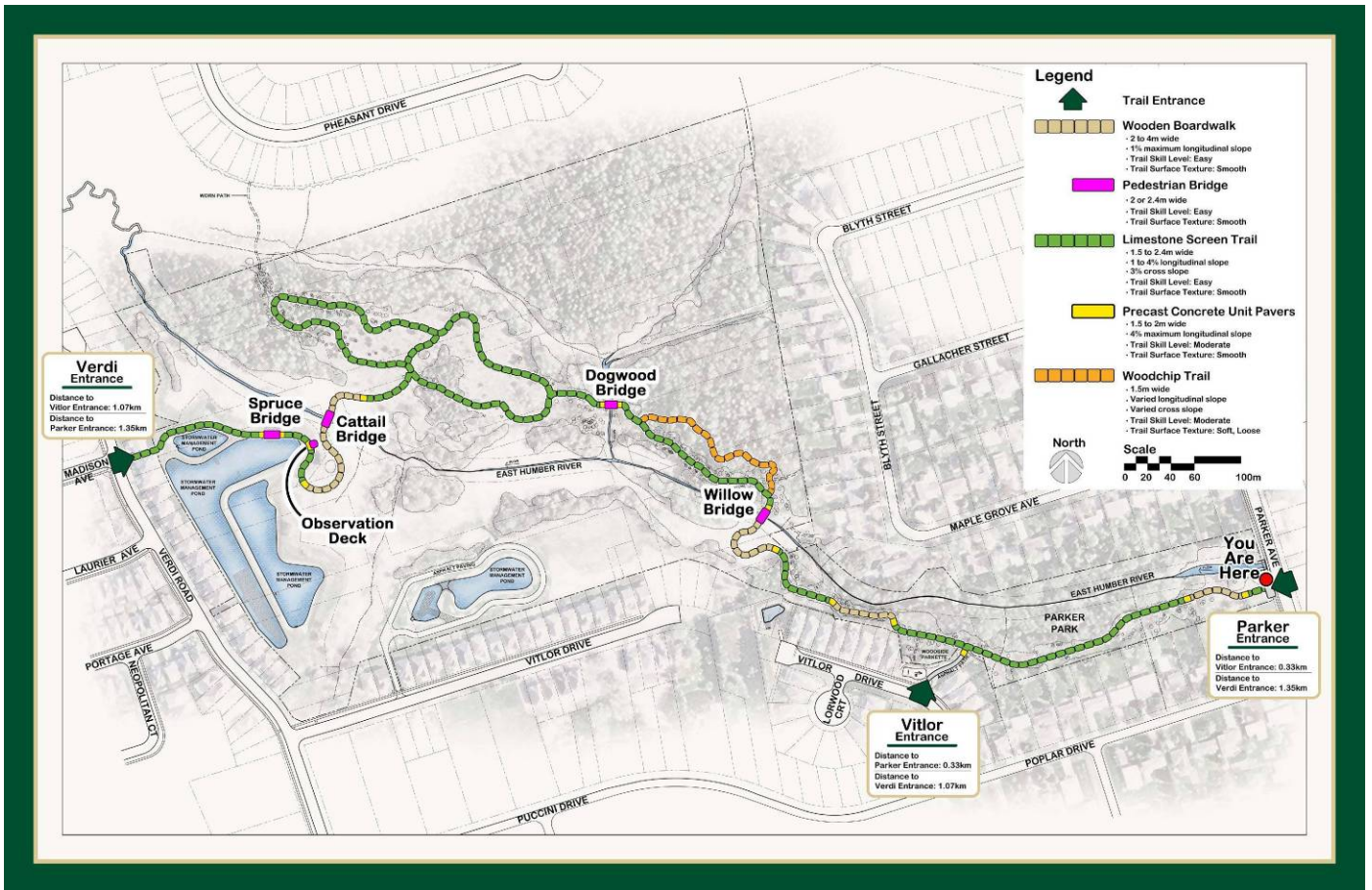
Curvaceous boardwalks are graced with custom curved benches.



Custom cut panels on the bridges and overlook deck showcase native plants found along the trail



A Variety of sensory and spatial experiences: As the trail meanders through various landscape typologies, its surface varies from woodchips, limestone screenings, unit paving and wooden boardwalks.



The trail maps indicate general layout, boardwalks, observation deck, bridges and trail surfacing

Project Credits:

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