



Year in Review

Feb. 1, 2025 to Jan. 31, 2026

Rideau Environmental Action League

President's Message

Working with the community on environmental issues

As the President of REAL, I am proud of the work that we completed last year. Despite having limited financial and human resources, we successfully maintained many of our popular programs.

The community support from members, volunteers, customers, municipal partners and corporate partners was incredible and gives the REAL Board the inspiration to continue its work.

As we look ahead, our focus will be on continuing our existing programs while investigating new opportunities. My thanks to our tremendous staff, Board, Municipal Partners, and Volunteers for their work in reaching this point. I look forward to achievements in the coming years.

We can work together to protect our environment.

Karen Schecter, President

Volunteers

REAL is extremely grateful to the many individuals who volunteer their time to make these projects happen. Since REAL's beginnings in 1989, their actions have been integral to REAL's accomplishments. From a two hour commitment to help at a special event, to the ongoing commitment of board members, all volunteers play an important role in the organization. Volunteer names are mentioned in our newsletter stories throughout the year. We welcome other community members to join us in demonstrating that together we can make real environmental difference.

REAL people taking REAL action to protect our environment.

The REAL Deal Reuse Store

Our Goals. The REAL Deal Reuse Store continues to thrive, attracting visitors from all over Lanark, Leeds and Grenville and beyond. Thrift shopping is becoming more popular, and it seems to be attracting a younger crowd than before. The goals of the store are 1) to reduce waste going to landfill 2) raise funds to support our other projects and 3) provide work and volunteer opportunities.

Reducing Waste. We work hard to ensure the materials donated make it into other people's hands instead of going to garbage. We offer promotions, promote our store through Facebook, and post more unique items on Facebook Marketplace. The free table is well-used.

Experience. The store operates with a collective total of 4.5 full time staff and about a dozen volunteers. Our two cashiers have been very consistent, while the yard staff fluctuates somewhat.

Dan Cunningham has been Store Manager since the fall of 2019. This year we were able to hire three young people over the summer, two through a federal Canada Summer Jobs grant and one through our own funds. We are pleased that many of our employees, placements and volunteers have gained skills to allow them to progress along their career path.

Raising Funds. Unfortunately, we have reached a point in our development where sales have somewhat plateaued, but expenses continue to rise, particularly wages, propane, insurance and snow clearing. Any revenues are used to support the store itself, and not so much other REAL projects.

There is a definite seasonal side to our social enterprise, with sales and donations much slower in the winter months. We are also very affected by the weather: severe cold, extreme heat, or heavy snow all affect both sales and donations.

Challenges. Other challenges include security in the form of unauthorized access to our yard and dome, and ewaste theft. Phone and internet has been an issue at times, and in our somewhat out of the mainstream location, our choices are limited. We do experience occasional localized roof leaks, and at extremely high water times can get water coming in through cracks in the cement floor, but they are usually resolved within days.

Capital. Capital improvements this year included a new bike rack, repaired trailer stairs, a new garage tent (half of the cost was covered by a Canadian Tire money donation) and some second hand shelving that has improved the look of the store interior.

We are about to sign a new five year lease with the Town of Smiths Falls for the use of the building. This is a very welcome development and will allow us to plan more effectively. We are also less concerned that cost prohibitive repairs are imminent.



GREENING PROJECTS

Spring Fundraiser. Our annual rain barrel and native plant fundraiser has become a welcome local event. We had preorders for 33 rain barrels and ordered in a supply to have available for sale at the REAL Deal throughout the season. The native plants this year came from Natural Themes Nursery in Frankford; about a third of them sold out in the first hour. We had some other donated plants in the mix and some bio-char available for sale. Trinity United Church sold their mushroom compost from our site that day and other weekends.

Evergreen Avenue. The Evergreen Avenue team manages a path through Victoria Park that features granite stones honouring veterans and other community members as well as native plantings. A June 22 Commemorative event at the Legion went very well with over 80 attendees. This year Dave Lawrence, Bill Baxter, Enid Rabb and Bud Fawcett were recognized. Environmental awards were presented to Joyce Hostyn and Little Forests Kingston for their support with our mini-forest planted in 2024.

Community Gardens. Our 12 plots provide the opportunity for residents to rent a garden plot to grow their own produce. Some repairs were made to the plots early in the season as they are showing their age. Despite the dry weather it was a productive year.

Compost Demo Site. This year the demonstration composting units were looked after by Ginny Toffanello. The finished product is used on REAL's monarch and community gardens.

Pitch In and Shoreline Cleanups. The annual spring Pitch In Smiths Falls cleanup is REAL's longest running project. Thanks to all the individuals, families and groups who picked up litter in the two weeks April 19 to May 3. And thanks to Ginny and Basil for taking charge of the Shoreline Cleanup on the final Saturday, May 3. The usual assortment of junk was collected at the morning and afternoon sessions by volunteers, and the weather cooperated for a change!

Monarch Gardens. The three monarch gardens on the REAL Deal site and the "Depave" gardens at Town Square continue to attract many favourable comments. A team of volunteers met weekly through the garden season (unless it was too hot) to tend these gardens. A few replacement plants were required. Some were purchased and others were left over from the spring native plant sale. The group also gathers and packages seeds to sell at our spring fundraiser.

Mini-Forest. REAL continues to monitor the mini-forest planted at the north end of Hyland Park in October 2024. The forest will not require maintenance in the long run. But this year a few plants that did not survive the winter were replaced, and volunteers removed large weeds in July and in October. Biochar was applied to the right half of the forest early in the season. In late summer the forest required some watering due to the severe drought. It was quite amazing to see how well the forest grew in its first year. We are planning another mini-forest at the Railway Museum in 2026.



Electronics

Recycling

The store's electronics recycling income increased this year to \$5700. That represents 38 tonnes of end of life electronic items as well as small electrical or battery operated appliances. Unlike REAL DEAL donations, we do not track the municipality where it originated. The drop-off has become a very welcome feature of our operation. Just a reminder that you do not need to put the items directly in the bin, just leave them against the wall. And no scavenging in the bin.



Communications

REAL communicates with the community through our website, email notices to members, several Facebook pages and Instagram. More details on any of the projects highlighted in this summary can be found in our "REAL Update" newsletter, published five times a year. It is available on our website, in print at the store, or by email to members.



Green Products

The store began selling Biochar this year. This natural, high-carbon soil amendment is made from sustainably processed fir and poplar by Green Carbon Products in Osgoode. REAL continues to sell Ecoice grip, an eco-friendly wood chip traction aid, that is safer alternative to deicing salt. It is used around the store as well. Rain barrels made from recycled food grade barrels are primarily used for home water conservation. In addition to the spring truckload sale, we keep a supply on hand at the store. These three items, and the REAL canvas bags are the only products REAL sells that are taxable.



Other Recycling

Residents appreciate that we accept some other materials for recycling:

- Scrap metal
- Outer milk bags
- Writing instruments
- Print and toner cartridges
- Batteries
- Scrap metal
- Crayons and glue sticks
- Used stamps

We would like to be able to add other items to this list in the future.

Scott Reid and John Jordan Visits

We were pleased to have both Scott Reid, MP and John Jordan, MPP come to see our operation in the fall. We gave them a tour of the site and outlined REAL's other community projects. The discussion also touched on some of the legislation that impacts non-profits such as ours. We appreciated the opportunity to explain what we do and let them know we need and appreciate their support.

Available to Borrow

REAL has a few devices that we make available to residents free of charge. The killawatt meters are used to measure the power consumption of plugged in appliances. The radon and air quality meter can alert people to possible dangers in their home. And the Foodcycler is a countertop kitchen composter, great for reducing waste volume, particularly for people without access to a backyard composter.

Online Auction

Our sixth online auction, run over 10 days in November, was very successful as a fundraiser. The event attracted \$4421 in bids on 200 items.

It also generated a lot of interest from the community and beyond, and is a great introduction to the REAL Deal store for newcomers, as they can look around the store when they come to pick up their items. Most of the items on the auction block were gently used items collected at the REAL Deal, supplemented by some donations from the community. We would like to increase this component in future years, but it is very labour intensive. We also approach members, the public, businesses and organizations for financial donations to the auction; this added \$1205 to our fundraising total.



Tool Library

Our Tool Library, located in a corner of the REAL Deal Store, is still not getting the traffic it deserves. Tool Library members can borrow any of the tools in our collection for one week at a time. We were very fortunate to have Phil Kennedy look after the Library over the past months. He looked after loans and returns, verified the inventory, fine tuned the filing system, improved the shelving and added some new tools to our collection. When he wasn't doing that he did various repairs around the store and to store donations. We are in need of tool-savvy volunteers or handypeople who would be interested in taking a role in this project.



Home Energy

The Home Energy Services portion of REAL's activities is winding down. The Canada Greener Homes Loan has been discontinued and the HER+ home energy assessment incentive program was discontinued the year before. Without these incentives, the requests for pre and post renovation home energy audits has slowed down for us. Alan Leonard, who has been our Registered Energy Assessor (REA) for over 20 years, plans to retire by the end of April 2026. REAL will not be looking for a successor. REAL still strongly believes that home energy assessments are a valuable tool for homeowners aiming to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions and costs with strategic improvements to their homes. REAL will be happy to suggest other environmentally motivated assessors who can service this area.



Community



REAL welcomes the opportunity to interact with the public through community events. This year this included the Carleton Place Earthfest, Mississippi Mills Earth Day, the Sustainable North Grenville Fair, Rideau Roundtable's Paddlefest, the Big Thrift Event, Tay Watershed Discovery Day, and the Friday Open Air Market. REAL contributed to the Rideau District Science Fair and to the Rideau Roundtable's Wetlands Awareness Tours and Ecoliteracy Programs. REAL makes material contributions to other local non-profits on request.

Behind the Scenes

REAL is overseen by a volunteer board of five people. We desperately need to find more members to lighten the load and ensure the organization's future. The board meets monthly by zoom to plan our activities and ensure we have the necessary funds to operate. Every one of the project highlighted in this newsletter is overseen by one or more of these five people. Please get in touch if you are interested in joining the board or in contributing in some other capacity.

This year REAL secured community grants from each of the Town of Smiths Falls and the Townships of Rideau Lakes and Montague, as well as a very generous donation from Brooke Henderson. Our Annual General Meeting (AGM) is an opportunity to connect with our membership. Last June's AGM featured two guest speakers.

Planning for Our Future



Like most non-profits, REAL tries to diversify its revenue streams, and donations from the public are an important component of that. If you believe in and appreciate what REAL is doing for the local environment and community awareness, please consider a tax deductible donation. Etransfers to payments@REALaction.ca are the preferred method but cash, cheque, Paypal and Canada Helps (especially for monthly donations) are options as well. See our Donate page for details. You could also consider including REAL in your estate planning.

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