

## **IBM and City of Markham Launch Online and Telephone Virtual Agent for Questions Related to COVID-19**

**New innovative service uses Artificial Intelligence (AI) and machine learning to provide an enhanced user experience and keep residents safe during the global pandemic.**

MARKHAM, ON – In a Canadian first, IBM (NYSE: [IBM](#)) and the [City of Markham](#) – Canada’s high-tech capital – are using the artificial intelligence-driven virtual agent “IBM Watson Assistant for Citizens” to offer 24-hour customer service for residents looking for COVID-19 information. The solution will use AI and machine learning to enable the City of Markham to deliver reliable, consistent and accurate information conveniently to residents via online text chat and voice calls – anywhere, anytime.

“Serving our community has always been a priority for the City of Markham, and providing up to date information is even more critical during this public health emergency,” says Markham Mayor Frank Scarpitti. “We need to ensure that people can access information quickly and that it is accurate. At the City of Markham, we embrace technology and this initiative exemplifies the important partnership we share with IBM Canada, IBM Headquarters and the IBM Software Lab that are an integral part of our community.”

IBM is offering Watson Assistant for Citizens to governments, healthcare and academic institutions via the [IBM public cloud](#), free of charge for at least 90 days, along with access to IBM experts who will help organizations set up the virtual agent. It brings together [Watson Assistant](#), [Natural Language Processing](#) capabilities from IBM Research, and state-of-art enterprise AI search capabilities from IBM [Watson Discovery](#), to understand and respond to common questions about COVID-19.

Markham joins government agencies and organizations in the USA, the Czech Republic, Greece, Poland, Spain and the UK who are also leveraging the IBM AI technology to help residents find the information they need using any device.

“With information changing almost hourly, it’s essential that people have the right tools available to keep themselves safe and healthy,” said Frank Attaie, VP Cloud at IBM Canada. “With years of experience using powerful technologies like AI, data analytics and cloud – our goal is to put the right knowledge at the fingertips of people to make more informed decisions as we navigate this crisis.”

The AI components can be adapted and expanded to specific customer needs and context. The pre-build content has been adapted to the City of Markham with information collected from the City of Markham website and Public Health authorities including the Public Health Agency of Canada, Ontario Ministry of Health and York Region Public Health. No personal user information is collected during the user experience.

Some examples of questions that can be answered by Watson Assistant for Citizens include: “What are the symptoms of COVID-19?”, “How do I protect myself from COVID-19?”, “Where can I get tested for COVID-19 in Markham?”, “Are parks and trails closed?”, “What City services are available”, “Will my garbage be picked up as usual” and more.

The online virtual agent can be accessed via the City of Markham website, and the telephone virtual agent can be accessed by calling 1.833.926.0929 – enhancing Markham’s COVID-19 information hub

at [markham.ca/covid19](https://markham.ca/covid19).

Markham's Contact Centre continues to respond to inquiries about municipal services and programs at [customerservice@markham.ca](mailto:customerservice@markham.ca) and 905.477.5530, Monday to Friday between 8 AM and 5 PM.

COVID-19 will continue to impact Markham and the world throughout the coming months. The City will continue to work with all levels of government, our community and local businesses to help break the chain of transmission of COVID-19 and flatten the curve.

IBM and Watson Assistant for Citizens:

Alicia Ali, IBM External Communications at [Alicia.Ali@ibm.com](mailto:Alicia.Ali@ibm.com) or 905.220.9395

Markham Mayor Frank Scarpitti's Office:

Lama Nicolas, Senior Communications Advisor at [lnicolas@markham.ca](mailto:lnicolas@markham.ca) or 416.671.2890.

All other media inquiries / interview requests for the City of Markham:

Jennifer Yap, Coordinator, Communications and Media Relations at [jyap@markham.ca](mailto:jyap@markham.ca) or 437.229.2450.

About IBM efforts around COVID-19: Visit [ibm.com/covid19](https://ibm.com/covid19) and [newsroom.ibm.com/covid-19](https://newsroom.ibm.com/covid-19)

About Markham: Markham, an award-winning municipality with over 355,000 residents and the largest of nine communities in York Region, is home to over 400 corporate head offices and more than 1,500 high tech and life science companies. Markham is a leader in attracting foreign direct investment with more than 210 foreign companies located in the City. Founded in the 1790s, today Markham is Canada's most diverse community and enjoys a rich heritage, outstanding community planning and services, and a vibrant local economy. Markham has received the Excellence Canada Gold Award for Organizational Quality & Healthy Workplace, and multiple heritage and environmental awards. Stay Connected: Visit our [newsroom](https://newsroom.ibm.com) or search #MarkhamNews and #MarkhamEvents for the latest information on City programs, services and events.

For COVID-19 announcements from the City of Markham:

Visit [markham.ca/covid19](https://markham.ca/covid19) or listen to [105.9 The Region](https://www.105.9theregion.com) – Markham's information and emergency radio station.

 **[Download French version](#)**  
(100 KB)

---

<https://canada.newsroom.ibm.com/2020-04-29-IBM-and-City-of-Markham-Launch-Online-and-Telephone-Virtual-Agent-for-Questions-Related-to-COVID-19>