

INDEEDWHAT IFA chance to end mediocrity; [ONT Edition 1]

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Full Text (4198 words)

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After the Sunday Star ran its 'What If?' special in April, readers sent us close to 400 emails with their own ideas for improving Toronto. We handed them to Paul Bedford, a former city planner who now mentors on urban issues. He read them all, analyzed them, and has come to some critical conclusions. Mayoral candidates take note The people are ready for change

The late Jane Jacobs once said, "If Canada did not have strong and prosperous city regions, it would be a third world country." Over the next 30 years, 80 per cent of Canada's population and economic growth will be in the six city regions of Toronto, Montreal, Vancouver, Ottawa, Calgary and Edmonton. These places must be successful for Canada to succeed, and if there was one overwhelming message in the hundreds of emails I read, it was that Torontonians have a real passion for the future of their city and region.

And their biggest frustration? Our collective inability to act on good ideas and get on with making things happen.

With a municipal election only four months away, a new City of Toronto Act in force, unprecedented development pressure, and a new provincial Growth Plan for the Greater Toronto Area, this is a good time to ask some tough questions about our collective future.

Why are we not making more progress in getting good ideas implemented? Why do we seem to be just muddling through? Despite a booming private sector economy, we are suffering from a culture of poverty within local government that is holding us back. We must find a way to break through this mindset in order to move forward.

Perhaps a glimpse into Toronto's potential may help to bring about the changes needed.

What the people said

There is no shortage of good ideas that could transform the look and feel of Toronto for the better. It is clear people desperately want our leaders to tackle our problems head on and stop just talking about them. Whether it is gridlock, transit expansion, safety or climate change, Torontonians want bold leaders who will inspire them to follow a clear and positive direction that will produce a sustainable city and region.

People appear to be way ahead of our elected representatives, who are still struggling with 20th-century solutions to 21st-century problems - even though there is overwhelming evidence that more of the same is not working. The range of ideas can be grouped into a short list of powerful first- and second-tier themes that actually form the basis of an emerging vision for Toronto and the region.

They also constitute a pretty good agenda for all candidates running in the fall municipal

elections. The most powerful observation is that everything is connected to everything.

First-tier priorities

Community

People want to see us take ownership of our own problems, from the neighbourhood to the Greater Toronto Region. Suggestions for new ways to foster local citizenship and stewardship included local community advisory committees, a Toronto Volunteer Corps and an annual citywide potluck picnic held in all local parks.

Torontonians emphasized the importance of positive community involvement in city life and the need to find a way to share power with all socio-economic groups. They considered new models for successfully engaging people in the planning and development process essential.

There was also a strong desire to change the prevailing consumer mindset and attitude now associated with city hall. Put another way, city hall is not Wal-Mart. It serves citizens, not consumers, and people want to be treated that way.

Transit

People are fed up with declining transit service and frustrated with their inability to get around the region by transit. A growing number of city residents work in the 905 region and are forced to drive because of poor or non-existent transit. All-day transit service north-south and east-west throughout the city region is long overdue.

People also want to see a transit line to Pearson Airport. They want to see streetcar lines built throughout the city and they want the service to be at the level where there is always a streetcar in sight.

They also want to see continuous subway expansion, starting with such dense corridors as Eglinton Ave. They see how other cities of similar size have found a way to keep expanding their subway systems and wonder why we can't do the same. Madrid is perhaps the best example it has figured out a way to build 28 new stations in the past 10 years, with many more under construction over the next 10 years. It is now the fastest growing system in the world and is Europe's third largest after London and Moscow.

Public Realm

Former mayor David Crombie described the public realm as "the glue that holds the city together and forms the bedrock upon which it builds its prosperity, its communities and its social peace."

It constitutes all the elements of daily urban life that we rely on, including education, health care, social services, transit, water and sewer facilities, arts and culture, public safety, justice, libraries, streets, sidewalks, public spaces and much more. Continued investment in the public realm is essential for a high-quality civic life.

This theme found wide expression in all forms, from the conversion of unused or

orphaned lands into public spaces in every ward, a continuous promenade of up to 15 kilometres around the entire waterfront, a big downtown public space on or near the water, and the redesign of great streets like University Ave. into Champs Elysee-style boulevards with wider sidewalks, streetscape amenities, public activities in the medians and retail shops and cafes to bring the streets to life day and night.

Perhaps most revealing was the strong desire for Toronto to strategically reinvest in the physical and social infrastructure of priority neighbourhoods in need, to stop the decline of public services, and to set new public-realm investment priorities over the coming term that will make a difference to everyday life.

Second-tier priorities

Waterfront

The waterfront was given much attention as a special place for all Torontonians to enjoy. There was evident public support for the recent West 8 winning design concept to re-image Queen's Quay, the water's edge and the heads of all slips. This is one area where people say, "Just do it!"

An overwhelming majority also want to see the conversion of the Island Airport into a car-free sustainable community instead of a busy airport that upsets the balance of mixed-use activities on the waterfront.

City Building

The current development boom throughout the region has brought to the surface the importance of beauty, quality of architecture and urban design in shaping the next layer of buildings now being planned and built. People want our public and private buildings to enhance the look and feel of our communities. They want them to strengthen the fabric of our local shopping streets.

They also want them to help inspire love and affection for our city and contribute to the heart and soul of the city.

Housing

People called for greater housing choice within local communities to meet the needs of people throughout their life cycle. This included a full range of housing options for all segments of society, including both affordable and seniors' housing. Most people want the option of aging within a familiar community where they feel comfortable and are well known by neighbours, local merchants and medical professionals.

A largely untapped opportunity exists for mid-rise housing on major streets to satisfy this range of housing needs. Many people want to live on main streets where they can walk to local shops, use existing transit and be part of the daily life cycle of activities of the community. This was especially true of younger and older populations.

Walking

Full attention to the pedestrian was a powerful common thread, with a rapidly growing downtown population that now frequently walks to work. The importance of a strong pedestrian environment to support local retail merchants was also a priority.

However, readers pointed out that while the city has adopted a Pedestrian Charter to promote a walking city, you would be hard-pressed to see positive examples. The narrowing of sidewalk widths on St. Clair Ave. W. was one example cited. Space for cars was given priority over space for pedestrians.

People want to see more bold initiatives such as the one on St. George St. between Bloor and College, where sidewalks were widened and pedestrian amenities enhanced. Perhaps the upcoming experiment in August to devote a portion of Queen's Quay to a wide range of pedestrian and cycling activities will help to bring the Pedestrian Charter back to life.

Accessibility

The upcoming retirement of the baby-boom generation feeds readers' desire for a proactive accessibility agenda. The public realm that we depend on for daily urban life will need to be seen through the eyes of the senior who takes longer to cross the street, or the person in a wheelchair.

Toronto could be a leader by making the city the most accessible possible for local residents and visitors from all over the world, who would be drawn to Toronto by its reputation for outstanding accessibility.

Waste Management

Simply put, people are ashamed that we continue to ship our garbage to Michigan and remain incapable of solving our own waste problems. There was a strong desire to tackle this issue head-on.

Reference to Sweden's model of incineration and new laws on excess packaging stood out. There seems to be a collective desire to have an intelligent discussion about the options. Necessity is staring us in the face.

Sustainability

The concept of sustainability was embodied throughout the range of ideas. Simply put, this means living off our interest rather than our principal. It also means coming to grips with our present lifestyle in a positive way.

Since 50 per cent of emissions in North America are under the direct or indirect control of cities, there is an opportunity to make a difference.

But while many good things have been achieved, such as deep-lake cooling, green development standards, and green-roof and tree-advocacy programs, people are still skeptical about the depth of commitment to sustainable actions.

It is widely accepted that aggressive transit development could remove large volumes of

automobiles from our roads and thereby reduce emissions.

The recent adoption of the provincial "Places To Grow" plan to focus new growth into centres and built-up areas is a progressive step to battle sprawl; however, the companion transportation strategy was all about roads. There does not yet appear to be a companion transit strategy to service the current and future needs of a predicted four million new residents in the Greater Golden Horseshoe.

Other poor examples include the annual car-free day in Toronto, which is indistinguishable from any other day. This is in sharp contrast to how this day is treated seriously by our neighbours in Montreal.

In the 905, similar examples of inconsistent behaviour exist - Durham Region councillors recently voted to develop 1,400 hectares in the provincially designated greenbelt.

There seems to be a lot of talk but precious little action. Meanwhile, it is critical for the public and our political leaders at all levels to come to grips with the ever-increasing price of oil and the implications this will have on our society.

For example, it is useful to contemplate how much of the Toronto City Region would continue to function successfully if gas prices rose to \$2 or \$3 a litre, as they already have in Europe.

It is likely that large portions of the population would no longer be able to justify a car-dependent lifestyle and be forced to make major changes to their living and working arrangements. Car-dependent suburban communities would be in serious trouble while transit-supported communities would thrive.

What will future generations say about the buildings we construct, the waterfront we develop, the transit decisions we make? Will we be praised for having the foresight to confront our problems and build a sustainable city region or be condemned for our stupidity and short-term perspective?

The bottom line is that we are now at the tipping point of either making the right decisions that will produce a sustainable region or continuing to just talk meaninglessly.

How to interpret the message

There are many reasons why we are not doing as well as we could, but they all boil down to two things a lack of political will and a lack of money.

The lack of political will may have its origin in the abysmally low 30 to 35 per cent voter participation rate in municipal elections. The ward councillors who get elected generally only hear from people who share the same minority of interests.

As a result, Toronto and its GTA neighbours seem too willing to accept mediocrity, are still car-addicted, afraid of density and generally self-absorbed in their local affairs. We still seem to be preoccupied more with our private worlds than with investing in our public world.

We need to foster a sense of co-ownership among the people in our city and region, because we are all in this together. Perhaps serious governance reform at both the local level coupled with a creative new model of regional reform would raise voter interest. If people could see that their vote counted for major region-wide decisions as well as in their local community, they might be more willing to get involved in the democratic process.

The lack of money can be traced to the provincial downloading of transit, affordable housing and social services in the mid 1990s. This has left post-amalgamation Toronto with the impossible task of funding major new services from municipal property taxes.

Simply put, there is not enough revenue generated to cover the costs of maintaining, let alone expanding, these basic services. After almost 10 years, it should be evident that we can't just wait for things to get better. We need a hard-nosed assessment of why the city behaves the way it does. Brutal honesty and a willingness to take steps to correct what is wrong are essential ingredients before we can move forward.

This must also include a full-scale examination of how the civic bureaucracy is organized - who does what and why. The bureaucracy should be put under a sustainable lens and given a clear purpose. A new institutional capacity must be developed at city hall that embraces more experimentation and risk-taking; we also need cross-department staff teams for neighbourhood and public realm investment that are empowered to get things done.

The recent governance changes adopted by Toronto Council under the new City of Toronto Act are a start, but there is much left to do.

Toronto is both too big and too small. It has proven too large for communities to feel connected to their local government and yet is too small to address its regional infrastructure priorities.

This problem represents unfinished business. A new model of local civic engagement that produces an ongoing dialogue between communities and city hall is essential. A new model for regional problem-solving is equally critical.

A strong community-planning presence would be a good start; it would re-establish the importance and relevance of planning in the life of the city. We desperately need to develop a model that produces conversations, rather than arguments, at the local, city and regional levels.

Many of the responses to the "What If?" articles were also valuable for their perspective on Toronto, and not just for their ideas. What really matters to people is face-to-face contact with each other. This applies to communities, to civic staff, and to elected leaders.

Once trust is developed, society often displays both ingenuity and creativity and is more capable of embracing change.

If politicians can give people a clear vision that answers the question "Why?" they will figure out how to get there. Most people will help to implement good ideas, but they first

need to understand why it is important.

Canadians recently ranked climate change as the number-one worry in a major national poll, with 72 per cent of respondents putting it at the top of their list. I believe this is because people are starting to see how climate change relates to, and will continue to relate to, their personal lives, and they are becoming motivated to act. This is clearly an area where people expect much of their politicians and appear to be ready to embrace strong leadership.

Torontonians would do the same for this city if their leaders made them understand why change is important. The role of city planners in this is vital. They need to provide both solutions to current problems and ideas for the future. They have an obligation to lead the change process, to shake the tree more than ever before, and to be the change agent we want to see in our society.

Choices and consequences

Leadership

Toronto's poet laureate, Pier Giorgio Di Cicco, has said "the true measure of a city is its soul. This is the restless energy that doesn't wait for political leadership."

There is a lot of restless energy out there looking for a home right now. Toronto and the region are building a new layer of city and developing a new style that is all about discovering our self-confidence. We are a great city that is full of potential and ambition looking to rise to the next level.

However, we are still unsure of how to get there and struggle with an inferiority complex about our place in the world.

The choice for our political leaders is simple. We can wait for others to solve our problems or spell out a clear plan of revenue generation, partnership development and urban reform together. We have all the ingredients to assume control of our own future if we are willing to think, act and plan differently. Toronto has at times been a leader in city building, transit development and successful urban experimentation, and we can do it again in both the city and the region.

Where are the political leaders who are prepared to aggressively champion the development of a dense network of subways, streetcar lines and buses to serve the needs of a 10 million-plus region, and who are willing to figure out how to pay for it? People will follow and support leaders who have the ability to get the job done.

Revenue

We need to confront the hard truths of revenue generation. Toronto's physical and social infrastructure is deteriorating and the city is chronically short of money.

There are two choices Either transit, social services and social housing must be jointly funded by senior governments through a permanent share of income and/or sales tax

revenue, or the Toronto City Region collectively has to pay for them.

The downloading of these big-ticket items to City of Toronto property taxes has crippled the city's budget capacity. We can't continue to exist in a culture of poverty and use it as an excuse for not being able to do anything. None of this will be easy but we absolutely must have the discussion, because the current arrangement is totally unsustainable.

A revenue menu that would make a difference should start with modest tolls on the entire 400 series of highways, including the Don Valley Parkway and the Gardiner Expressways, in addition to vehicle registration and licence fees.

All this revenue should be dedicated to transit development, with an immediate and substantial increase in the frequency of transit service. People must see a dramatic improvement overnight so they know their money is at work. The city could borrow against the massive revenue stream generated from road tolls and vehicle fees and use the money to buy new transit vehicles up front, so a huge visible increase in transit service occurs on the first day of electronic toll collection.

As well, the proposed Greater Toronto Transit Authority should have a strong mandate to build new transit lines within set time frames.

The GTTA should be primarily comprised of non-elected professionals who will look at the big picture and not be constrained by the local agenda. It should be the main vehicle for implementation of "Places to Grow," the recently adopted provincial growth plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe.

To facilitate rapid transit development, we need a special environmental assessment process that actually builds transit lines instead of building more bookshelves for endless reports.

Other regional revenue-generating mechanisms that should be explored include either a Toronto City Region sales tax or an income tax.

While such a tool would of course be controversial, there is now room to actually bring in a 0.5 per cent regional sales or income tax thanks to the federal government's reduction of the GST from 7 to 6 per cent. A new regional tax of this kind would generate ongoing revenue that would grow with the economy and would still mean that GTA residents would be paying less sales tax overall.

This argument becomes even more attractive when the GST is scheduled to be reduced from 6 to 5 per cent in the future. While no one likes to pay taxes, the truth is they buy us the essential services and facilities that make urban life possible.

These new revenue tools would need to be applied to the entire Greater Toronto and Hamilton Region, not just to the City of Toronto. Together, these revenue-generating mechanisms could produce billions of dollars for the development of essential regional transit and infrastructure.

The need for partnership

The transformation of the city and suburbs over the next 30 years into a sustainable urban region will require much stronger relationships between private and non-profit sector leaders and senior governments.

The current division between the city of Toronto and its suburbs and beyond is not healthy. The Toronto City Region functions as one economic unit and should be viewed as an integrated place where everything is connected to everything.

We need a regional body that has the clout and revenue base to coordinate and build the systems that will hold the region together. The GTTA could form the basis of such a body. It could evolve over time with a mix of political representatives from the municipal, provincial and federal levels in addition to non-elected appointees with professional expertise. Given the benefits of a prosperous Toronto City Region to the provincial and federal governments, perhaps special financial incentives should be examined by senior governments to encourage regional collaboration in key areas of physical, economic, social and environmental infrastructure.

The reality is that governments can't do it all and need to advance the development of innovative partnerships that target particular problems. One most recent example is a report entitled "Time for a Fair Deal," which dealt with the need to modernize income security for working-age adults. It was a joint product of many leading private sector corporations, public and non-profit partners that have a stake in our society.

If this model was repeated over and over throughout the urban region, a concentrated new set of resources and energy would produce multiple successes. It would also help to break down barriers that often prevent the development of creative solutions to the common urban challenges of youth unemployment, gang violence, affordable housing, and poverty.

Toronto has gone through three experiments in urban reform. The first lasted from 1953 to 1997. It involved the creation of the Metro government in 1953, successive provincial governments that took a proactive role in the life of the city and the region, and the election of a reform city council and mayor in 1972. This lengthy but progressive experiment unleashed a flood of positive city-building initiatives and public-realm investment that we are still living off today.

The second experiment started with the amalgamation of Toronto with five other local governments in 1998. The past eight years have produced political, bureaucratic and community confusion. Despite the efforts of thousands of good people and positive examples of achievement, the experiment has produced mixed results.

The third experiment is the one we are all now just starting. It is marked by a new City of Toronto Act, changes to the Planning Act and the Ontario Municipal Board, along with provincial leadership in regional planning, greenbelt protection and a new Greater Toronto Transit Authority.

Perhaps most important, it is marked by an unprecedented desire to get things done. This attitude is positive and should give our political leaders the courage to spell out an

aggressive urban reform agenda.

Politicians running for local office should be asked to outline their key ambitions for their city and region. With a new four-year term of office commencing after the November election, they must be held accountable for how well they deliver over this extended period of time.

The next four years should be a time of optimism about our future. We have the chance of a lifetime.

[Illustration]

Stuart Nimmo TORONTO STAR Paul Bedford and some of the hundreds of readers' emails he read for this piece City hall is still struggling with an inferiority complex, he says, but the people believe in their city and want more. Rene Johnston toronto star Rene Johnston toronto star

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People: Bedford,
Paul
Section: *Ideas*
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