

Investing in the Public Realm: Toronto's Future

Mayor David Miller

Address to the Scarborough Chamber of Commerce

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Thank you for having me here today. I'd like to thank the Scarborough Chamber of Commerce for organizing this luncheon again this year.

Last year when I was here I addressed you on the subject of community safety and the need for businesses to offer employment to youth-at-risk. After that event, many of you responded by speaking directly to me, or by calling the City's community safety secretariat. Some great partnerships and placement opportunities were created. I thank you for that.

Today I will again ask you to commit to your city. I want to talk to you about reinvesting in the public realm. This is a subject that has always been extremely important to me. It's my commitment to the public realm that prompted me to leave a private law practice for politics, and which inspired me to run for Mayor.

When I speak about the public realm I am not only talking about public spaces and public *services*, but also about commitment to public *service* and to investing in our city. These concepts are, of course, interconnected, and all play a pivotal role in the major initiatives of my office.

Our efforts to rejuvenate Toronto's waterfront, or, more immediately, City Council's Clean and Beautiful City initiative – these are efforts that are meant not only to beautify public space and to improve city services, but also to engage the residents of Toronto with their city.

The City's Clean and Beautiful initiative best illustrates the importance of both public spaces and public service. Since I last addressed you, Council approved a five-point action plan that will help us move ahead with this initiative.

Those five points are:

- sweep it
- design it

- build it
- grow it,
- and celebrate it.

These are simple ideas. But I don't feel that cleaning and beautifying Toronto has to be a complicated affair. We just need to do it. And we are. This spring, we have put more resources and energy than ever before to getting outside as soon as the snow melts to tackle the litter.

This is making a difference – the city IS cleaner this spring – you can see it almost everywhere. We continue to face challenges in some of the areas where your businesses are, particularly on major boulevards, and areas not of our jurisdiction, such as along the 401 or along the railway corridors.

But we are making progress.

On Friday and Saturday, as we did last year, we will take to the streets with tens of thousands of Torontonians in a massive spring clean-up effort. On Friday we are asking businesses and schools to spend just 20 minutes on the “20 minute Toronto makeover”, and on Saturday we are doing a widespread clean-up of parks and ravines.

Many companies and small businesses have been great partners with this annual event, and I thank you for that.

These simple concepts – sweep it, design it, build it, grow it, and celebrate it - will carry us forward from our initial efforts to clean up litter on our streets, through to our ultimate goal of an architecturally splendid city that we are proud to show off to ourselves, and to the world.

The implications for public spaces are, I think, obvious. “Clean and beautiful” applies to our streetscapes, our parks and squares, and to public art installations. It deals with

everything from the design of newspaper boxes and streetsigns, to architectural landmarks, like the Four Seasons opera house or the transformation of the Art Gallery of Ontario and the Royal Ontario Museum.

Much of the work around Clean and Beautiful deals with specific details and concrete issues – how can we keep our parks free of litter? What should the new art gallery look like? How can we increase our urban tree canopy?

Every one of these issues is important, but none of them on its own is enough to realize a complete vision for the city.

It's not enough to merely claw our way out of the neglect and decay that befell Toronto over the last decade. It's not enough to simply *maintain* the status quo.

We need to move beyond scenarios of what I call “managed decline”, or even “holding the line where we are now.”

We must *undertake a massive investment in the public realm*. We have to do this so that Toronto can move to the next stage as a great international city.

This means that every corner of the city and every community in the city must be energized about our revitalization. This means that we must *all* take ownership of the *whole* city.

This means that we recognize, no matter where we do business, that it is important to create a beautiful park in Etobicoke, build a pleasing street of mixed income homes near the waterfront, build the first community centre in the old City of York, or line a boulevard with trees in North York. It means that we should complete the Sheppard subway to its logical terminus in Scarborough, and that we should all understand why that's good for Toronto.

I challenge *all* of us to see ourselves as citizens of *all* Toronto.

If Toronto is to be truly clean and beautiful, we need to realize a grand vision that encompasses our entire city. We have to continue to celebrate the diversity of fabulous neighbourhoods, and at the same time, we have to invest in our public spaces in ways that give the whole city unity.

You should be able to walk down a street anywhere in the city and have it be an unmistakably Toronto experience. It has to show in the architecture, the streetscapes, the bus shelters, the recycling bins and a hundred other elements of the public realm. You and I both know that this is not the case right now.

Why is this so important? It matters for many reasons, but the most important is that the public realm is where a city finds its soul. What's more, investing in the public realm is good for business.

We are all aware of Toronto's incredible diversity, and the strength we draw from that. Investment in the public realm is what makes that diversity such a strength. Public spaces – the TTC, our parks, city buildings, and so on – are both a showcase for the city's diversity, and also the place where all those people who come here from all over the world discover what it means to be a Torontonians.

We have both a responsibility, and an enlightened self-interest in keeping those spaces inviting and accessible to everyone.

City Hall, of course, is in charge of protecting and enhancing those public spaces. This is a crucial part of our job. But here is where I want to talk about commitment to public service, a notion that extends far beyond the work of City Council and of public sector workers.

Our public spaces are for everyone, and everyone has the right – not to mention the responsibility – to get involved with their wellbeing.

More than any other government, municipal government offers ways to be involved.

Whether you join us on Friday in the annual spring clean-up of the city, put an ashtray out in front of your restaurant, organize sidewalk floral displays in conjunction with your local BIA, or come down to City Hall to make a deputation before a committee of Council, there are many ways that you can help us invest in the public realm.

The Clean and Beautiful initiative is a very concrete example of the importance of public service and public space. While it might seem less obvious, investing in the public realm is central to other major initiatives of my office – like the New Deal for Cities.

When we talk about the New Deal – whether we are talking about the need for revenues that grow with the economy, the City of Toronto Act, or a “seat at the table” with the other governments – these things can sound a little abstract. I know that.

Even when these things are boiled down to their essence – the city wants more power, money, and respect – it may not be immediately apparent that we are talking about a historic turning point for our city. But we most certainly are.

For example, when we have finished writing a new City of Toronto Act with the province, Toronto will have a new constitution. That is the “power” part. How will that affect you? Well, it will free up your city government to be creative as we remake Toronto, as we re-invest in the public realm. Toronto has been, as a “creature of the province,” constrained in our ability to make decisions based solely on what is good for the city and its residents.

A concrete example of this? We have not been able to set design standards within the city, as, for instance, Vancouver does. There are buildings in Toronto – frankly terrible

buildings that are despised by the neighbourhoods in which they stand – that exist solely because the City’s efforts to impose design and building standards were steamrolled by the Ontario Municipal Board.

After we have negotiated the City of Toronto Act, we will possess the power to decide as a City what our design standards are. At the very minimum, we will be able to adhere to our Official Plan without fear that another government will override well-thought out plans crafted by the City and our residents.

Not having to live within externally imposed constraints should free us up to start imagining, thinking about how we want our city to look and figuring out how to make those crucial investments in the public realm. And as the “power” part of the New Deal comes together, we will be an equal partner with the other orders of government, so that policies on everything from immigration to child care to public health will be determined in a way that makes sense *for Toronto*.

We will have the political power to set Toronto’s priorities, and the practical power to carry those priorities out. At a fundamental level, this is about accountability to the people, and about *power in the public interest rather than power for power’s sake*.

Obviously, making the sort of investment I am talking about will cost money. As you well know, after years of cuts to programmes and parallel downloading of services, Toronto faces a perennial budget crunch.

We cannot make the sort of investment we need to on the back of the property tax rolls. It is simply not possible. Your property taxes are already paying for things they should not, and that is wrong.

I am speaking in part about provincially mandated social programmes that Queen’s Park obliges us to deliver. The cost of these is fully \$500 million every year on the City

budget. The province obliges us by law to deliver these programmes, but then does not pay its bills.

This means that you are being asked to pay for these programmes *twice* – once out of your income tax and then once again out of your property tax. Ontario is the *only* province that does this, and it is clearly not sustainable. This year alone, it left us with a 70 million dollar hole in our budget, and that amount will grow to roughly 100 million next year.

The way we finance cities in this country simply does not work. European countries do not finance cities this way, nor does the United States.

Take the example of tourism. Tourism is critical to the city's economy, but if we were to run City government as a business runs, we would have to ask tourists to stop coming here, because when they do it costs our local government money. The City subsidizes the cost of the transit tourists use, of the emergency services we provide, of policing, and so on. All of those City services are available to tourists. And unlike many American and European cities, we do not collect a penny of sales tax, hotel tax, or car rental tax.

Federal and provincial governments' coffers grow when tourism is healthy, but not the City's.

Tourism is of course good for the economy – and to be clear we would never tell tourists not to come here - but once again the revenue generated never reaches City government. *A fundamental mismatch between resources and responsibilities continues to hamper our growth.*

When I speak of the money it will take to make this investment in the public realm, I am not just speaking about our annual scramble to balance the City's budget and deliver the services people tell us they want.

And on the subject of the City budget, let me pause for a moment here and address the notion I continue to hear that the City has yet to “get our own house in order.” This notion is simplistic, and I want to put it to rest.

Let me remind you how the City budget breaks down. Roughly one third of our budget is devoted to delivering provincially mandated programmes – social programmes the City is obliged by law to deliver. More than one third of our budget goes to police, fire, ambulance and TTC, and I’m not hearing anyone say that we should reduce those services – I am hearing the opposite. Everything else the City does – libraries, parks and recreation – has been cut to the bone.

What’s more, the Municipal Performance Measurement Programme, which compares Toronto’s efficiency against those of other municipalities, ranks Toronto as the second most efficient municipal government in Ontario in terms of cost of administration.

This does not mean that we don’t constantly strive to find efficiencies – we do and we must. But the sorts of savings that we are able to find within our budget – millions of dollars, perhaps – will *never* come close to providing us with what we need to make genuine investment in the public realm.

I am not talking about millions of dollars. *I am talking about hundreds of millions of dollars.*

The city’s infrastructure deficit – that is the difference between the rate at which our infrastructure is declining vs. our ability to maintain it in a state of good repair - is huge, it’s significant, it’s overwhelming, and it’s growing.

Let me say that again, because it’s important that I be clear about the enormity of this. If we are going to close this gap between the resources we have and what we need to

succeed and thrive, we are going to need to generate hundreds of millions of additional dollars annually.

We need to do this in order to invest in Toronto's young people, in order to build roads, affordable housing, expand public transit, in order to remake our waterfront and revitalize Toronto.

I know you're asking yourself where this money is going to come from. *My position is that this funding should come from revenues that grow with the economy. The City is seeking a share of existing and growth revenues, as opposed to asking for new taxes to cover our mounting costs.*

We already know that Torontonians pay \$11 billion more in revenues to the provincial and federal governments than we receive back in services.

On top of that, every year the provincial and federal governments collect hundreds of millions of dollars in *new* revenue from Toronto's economy. This new revenue comes from growth in sales and income taxes. But none of that growth comes back to the City directly. We're asking for a portion of that growth to be left here, where it is generated, so that we can make the necessary investments in Toronto's public realm.

This is the *only* way that we can ensure that as Toronto grows, we will be able to provide the services that businesses tell us they need the most.

Securing a share of revenues that grow with the economy is the only way we can embark on a grand vision for our city with the assurance that we will have the money and power to see it through.

Our challenge is to find ways to harness your energy and skills, the resources and expertise of Toronto's business community, in our efforts to secure this New Deal.

What can you do? I have already outlined some of the ways to get involved on specific projects, like the Clean and Beautiful programme. And so many of you are already engaged on this level – whether it is through your chamber of commerce or elsewhere.

But at that broader New Deal level, I need your help there too. I need your advocacy and your passion. I need you to tell your federal and provincial members of Parliament: leave some of that revenue here so that we can invest it in Toronto.

I need you to champion Toronto – to understand the broader vision – to embrace the long-term goals of investment in the public realm.

By its very nature, the public realm is something every one of you, as individuals and as businesses, has a stake in. It's only through widespread involvement in public initiatives that we can get to that last point in our Clean and Beautiful plan: celebrate it.

After all, what we're really talking about here is building a city that we love to live in.

A city that you can get excited about every time you step outside onto the street.

A prosperous city with a vibrant street life and a rich culture.

A city where people feel they belong, because they helped to make it what it is.

That is our challenge and our opportunity. I look forward to working with you to ensure that this is what our city becomes.

Thank you.

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