

# Toronto Board of Trade plan short on new ideas: Levy

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TORONTO - Former city budget chief David Soknacki said Monday he's still waiting to hear whether the Top Five mayoralty candidates are prepared to articulate tough decisions that address the city's ballooning debt, police and transit budgets.

Citizens are paying \$350 per household for transit on their tax bill compared to \$200 before Mayor David Miller took over leadership of the city, he said. The police budget has grown 25% even as the crime rate has fallen.

Debt has jumped from \$200 to \$270 per household during the same time period, he added.

"These are the tough issues before us and no amount of Visa cards or plant watering is going to deal with those big tough issues," Soknacki said following the release of the Board of Trade's 20-page municipal campaign platform Monday.

He is adamant that the next mayor will have to deal with the city's huge employee costs - some 70% plus of the current operating budget - by encouraging competition.

Soknacki points out that the \$50-million in grants can be eliminated, in whole or in part, but a mayor who does so will have to be able to recognize that these grants serve particular constituencies.

(He was far more diplomatic than me. I'd venture to say that the next mayor will be forced to deal with much mewling, whining and handwringing from those on the grants gravy train should they catch a whiff that their handouts are in trouble.)

"Everyone would cut plant watering if that would solve the issue...that's easy," Soknacki said. "But it's the tough issues of dealing with police, with transit, with debt...that's how you eventually free up the money to have for the parks programs and for the transportation we all want."

He feels it also "makes sense" to sell off Toronto Hydro to pay down the city's mushrooming debt.

Asked which candidate he prefers, he said he's checked off "None" at this point.

Ahhh. It was refreshing to hear Soknacki's forthrightness. After all, this is indeed the kind of meat on the bone we should be hearing from all candidates, especially considering all of their other wonderful plans for the city can't go very far without - you guessed it - money.

At least the former budget chief cut to the chase, which is more than I can say for BOT president and CEO Carol Wilding.

Exactly 10 months after launching the Vote Toronto 2010 campaign - and a mere six weeks before the election - Wilding treated us to largely the same platitudes we've heard before.

Entitled "Pushing the Boundaries" the BOT campaign document does anything but that.

Bland and milquetoast, it is long on rhetoric about the economic and fiscal challenges that face the city - many of which have been identified over and over again in the 40-plus debates undertaken by the would-be mayors in recent months.

But it hesitates to take a stand on much.

For instance, the document proposes yet another expert panel - as if City Hall needs another one of those - to review whether the city has used its new powers under the City of Toronto Act effectively and how to lessen red tape.

Of all organizations, the BOT should be able to answer both questions.

The Act has only been used to tax, license and regulate.

I certainly don't need an expert panel either to tell me that red tape can be reduced by getting rid of useless bylaws like the private tree bylaw and dismantling the endless fiefdoms set up at City Hall to manage the red tape.

Perhaps one of the most impressive proposals in the document relates to contracting out to the private sector some of the TTC routes in certain regions.

Even there, I would go one step further and suggest putting out for competition whole parts of the TTC business like the operation of bus routes or streetcar routes. It's been done in Melbourne, as I discovered during a visit there in 2002.

That said, with six weeks to go until voting day, I highly doubt the BOT document will become the policy bible of the mayoralty campaign.

I'm with Soknacki.

Let's hear more about how the candidates plan to push their own boundaries and make the real tough choices.