

Urban vision carries a price

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Voters are looking for solutions: for the city's chronic financial shortfalls, for its quarrelsome relationships with Queen's Park and Ottawa, and to fix a structure that many feel is out of touch with reality.

Without a doubt, the city's challenges have been increased by provincial governments.

Reliable funding for transit has been replaced by annual pilgrimages to Queen's Park for individual projects. Social housing responsibility was transferred in exchange for an inadequate grant. Welfare rules require municipalities to pay for entirely predictable gaps in funding. These and other unfunded mandates are a major financial drain.

Despite this handicap, Toronto's mayors have been determined not to surrender control of the political agenda. It is unfortunate, though, that they have made a difficult situation far more problematic by undertaking initiatives that are breathtaking in scope, with little regard for underlying financial realities or the ability to deliver over the long term.

Mayor Mel Lastman started the tradition by promising to freeze municipal taxes. Not only were revenues of perhaps \$50 million foregone annually, but shortfalls needed to be recovered from the few city programs that would accept reductions.

Another example is Mayor David Miller's vision for transit. Conceived to take advantage of an upcoming provincial election, light rapid transit lines were drawn across city maps with little consultation and no funding. It caught the imagination of the campaigning provincial Liberals, who promised millions – contingent on the federal Conservatives being similarly obliging. Before long, the city's administration and transit planners were approving contracts. Even though transit faces challenges maintaining existing routes, funding was reallocated and long-term commitments were made. When the federal government finally refused funding, the city found it had new obligations to honour. Nevertheless, it continued with expansion by increasing debt and deferring other projects.

It doesn't have to be this way.

Without a doubt, Toronto must keep the pressure on Queen's Park to pay for services the province insists that municipalities deliver.

As well, every mayor must articulate a vision for the city.

But it is the mayor's responsibility to guarantee that dreams are achievable and sustainable. Part of the task of winning hearts and minds is to create a mandate for change or renewal. Electors will not be surprised to hear that urban services are expensive. Nor should they be shocked to learn that not all visions can be achieved simultaneously, without impacting other programs.

Whether the debate is held during the election campaign or as part of structured sessions, like those held on the budget, an explicit discussion on priorities will give a new mayor the resources and energy to support a new mandate.

To make the vision, priorities and impacts explicit to both public and bureaucracy, the mayor can present his goals to council at its opening session, to be reinforced by annual updates containing targets and measuring progress. This is a procedure used elsewhere, and has the ability to embarrass when projects are delayed or costs soar.

Once policy direction is established, the next step is to gain control of the city's administration. This is much easier said than done. A big part of the problem is that council and management exercise little control over the 119 agencies, boards and commissions that comprise most of the city's employees and provide key services, such as transit and police. When told to reduce budgets, their usual response is to submit increases – as we've seen in recent weeks. When asked to conform to basic administrative policies like having similar information systems, purchasing procedures or outside auditors, they provide excuses.

Fixing this problem must start with council establishing mandates and operating agreements for each of its agencies. Once every term, each agency should face an effectiveness review. Larger agencies, like police and transit, will require strategic plans based on public participation. A senior city manager should be empowered to standardize support functions and rationalize real estate holdings as appropriate.

As obvious as these changes appear, resistance will be overpowering. Agency boards are filled with councillors who see themselves as advocates first and as leaders with citywide responsibilities second. Powerful unions, such as those representing the police and firefighters, will launch political campaigns. Agency staff will provide every reason not to cooperate.

The next big steps will be to determine how the city can deliver better service or lower costs. Establishing an outside panel to submit recommendations probably is the only way to get a set of workable recommendations before council and the public. Again, resistance to change will be formidable.

Lastman tried to start the process through a committee of council. Due to constant resistance, it retreated to meeting in private, and finally was reduced to producing insignificant recommendations. One larger project – to establish an independent water board – was withdrawn before it reached council. Even the concept of making changes based on an employee suggestion program foundered during Miller's tenure.

At the next level of detail, there are many opportunities to free up resources and energy for a mayor's vision. Yet each program and asset was put in place for a reason. While the urgency for their creation may have faded long ago, each now is part of the city structure, and has built up a network of beneficiaries who will fight for preservation.

There is room for new visions. They can be achievable in the short term, and sustainable for the future. But they must be part of a package of priorities, with a credible commitment to win a public mandate for change.

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