

John Tory, Mayor

City of Toronto
City Hall, 2nd Floor
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**Submitted by Susan Kwong,
Social Planning Toronto**

May 10, 2017

Dear Mayor Tory and Members of Toronto City Council,

As Council sets its direction for City staff on the drafting of the 2018 budget, we urge you to focus on the many important, forward-thinking policy commitments you've made, and use them as your guide for making spending choices. After all, Council's choices in budgeting, reflect who, what, and where, your priorities are.

Over the last several years Council has shown leadership in adopting well-crafted strategies to better respond to the growing and complex needs of our diverse population. These include:

- TO Prosperity: Poverty Reduction Strategy
- Fair (Transit) Pass Program
- Toronto Strong Neighbourhoods Strategy
- Youth Equity Strategy
- Seniors Strategy
- Toronto Newcomer Strategy
- Housing Opportunities Toronto
- Recreation Services Plan
- Childcare Growth Strategy
- Transform TO: Climate Action for a Healthy, Equitable, Prosperous Toronto
- Middle Childhood Strategy

These City strategies respond to geographic and population needs, and service needs of the people of Toronto including housing, transportation, recreation, child care and food security.

These initiatives reflect Council's recognition that building a great city means taking real action.

Council deepened that commitment during the last budget debate, by deciding to incorporate an intersectional gender equity analysis in the budget process. This policy means looking at all of our spending in terms of who it helps, and who it hurts, not just in terms of how much it costs. This equity approach is critically important for the City to achieve progress on these key social development strategies.

Unfortunately, up to now, the City's budget process has failed to use a clear and transparent equity lens, and has not set its sights on our goals as a city. Instead, City departments shape their

budgets mostly from the previous year's spending, sometimes adding inflation and then following directions on a prescribed cut for the upcoming year. This makes the budgets much more focused on past practice than future goals. It constrains a process that should be focused on what we want to achieve to move forward as a community on key strategies. Instead of making choices that reflect real priorities, City budgets adopt "across the board" spending freezes or cuts as if there is no way to distinguish between the significance of closing homeless shelters and spending on street sweeping.

As a result of this, thousands of Torontonians have been let down by successive budgets, as reflected in the following statistics:

- 15,000 children waiting for subsidized child care (up 30% from last year)
- 101,000 households waiting to for an affordable and safe Toronto Community Housing unit (while units continue to be shut down)
- a 27% child poverty rate in Toronto (the highest among large Canadian cities)
- 189,000 person waitlists for city recreation programs (an increase of 64% over 3 years)
- 52% of workers in Toronto don't have stable, secure jobs

Toronto can do better.

The City can create budgets that are real reflections of the city we want to build together. We can do that by recognizing who is hurt when we cut specific services or raise transit fares or default on commitments to housing and poverty reduction. And we have to remember that we all have a stake in that. A city that dramatically fails low-income residents, struggling families and the inner suburbs is a city that fails us all.

The 2018 budget should not be just another budget like the previous ones. We need a budget that shapes itself around the needs of the city, the promises of Council, and the equity policy that Council has committed to.

We acknowledge that these are real challenges.

They involve real choices.

- Are we more committed to specific capital projects such as roads or new information technologies than we are to provision of safe housing and shelter for all people?
- Is the promise to keep property taxes at inflation more important than the promise to keep transit fares low, or the promise to reduce poverty? Should those promises turn out to conflict, whom do we choose to protect?
- And what revenue tools will the City develop and use to meet our needs and achieve our equity goals?

Council was impeded in some of its revenue generating efforts, when the Province prohibited the planned road tolls, but it has succeeded in others, like a vacancy tax and a hotel tax. Still, to build an inclusive city it is vital that the Council adopt other revenue tools. Council has lost significant potential revenue by keeping property taxes well below the GTA average. City consultations - the Core Service Review in 2011, and the Long-Term Financial Plan and city budget last year - show that many residents favour a modest tax increase when the alternative is reduced services and continued deprivation.

These are hard choices to make and they are made even harder by a budget process that makes it difficult to focus on city-building objectives rather than budget cutting strategies.

For the 2018 budget process, we ask that Council do the following:

- 1) Direct staff to begin the budgeting process by costing the capital and operating commitments the City has made to achieve our shared goals as a community as reflected in the policies, plans and strategies that Council has adopted.
- 2) Focus the budget discussion on finding equitable and sustainable ways to fully fund the city's commitments in these strategies, including raising property taxes to catch up to inflation and/or adopting specific revenue tools.
- 3) Put people first when deciding on priorities, rather than arbitrarily adopting across the board spending cuts that ignore the relative significance of different programs and investments.
- 4) Refrain from setting preconditions on the budget - such as a predetermined tax rate or spending limit - that prevent Council from making choices in full consideration of their social and economic impacts.
- 5) Implement the intersectional gender equity lens council adopted, as an element in budget discussions, processes and decisions, so Council, and the public, can see when budget decisions make already severe inequality in our City even worse. A similar racial equity lens is also badly needed.
- 6) Host, with the support of city staff, Community Town Halls in the summer or early fall before the departmental budgets are completed, to encourage public input on budget priorities.

Together we can build a city where people from all backgrounds can thrive and prosper. We look forward to working with you on making Toronto a livable city for all.

Sincerely,

(listed alphabetically by first name)

Leaders of Community Organizations

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Executive Director
Sanctuary Toronto

Rev. Andrea Budgey

Chair
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Anglican Diocese of Toronto

Angie Draskovic

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Brian Davis

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Additional Organizational Signatories

African Canadian Social Development Council

Commitment2Community

Firgrove Learning and Innovation Community Centre

People's Climate Movement – Canada

Social Justice Advocacy Committee of Congregation Darchei Noam

Scarborough Civic Action Network (SCAN):

Agincourt Community Services Association

Birchmount Bluffs Neighbourhood Centre

East Scarborough Storefront

Malvern Family Resource Centre

West Scarborough Neighbourhood Community Centre

Scarborough Centre for Healthy Communities

Scarborough Transit Action

Social Planning Toronto

Warden Woods Community Centre

Toronto Community Benefits Network

Toronto Women's City Alliance

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