

Listening to Toronto



**PRESENTATION TO THE JOINT MEETING OF THE
POLICY AND FINANCE COMMITTEE
AND
BUDGET ADVISORY COMMITTEE**

January 30, 2004



Message from the Mayor

One of my goals as Mayor of Toronto is to find more ways to engage Torontonians in discussions with the Mayor and Council before important decisions are made.

Among the most important debates on City Council's annual calendar is the budget. I can think of no better place to start a dialogue.

Listening to Toronto was a first for Toronto. We asked people to come and talk with their neighbours about the things that make Toronto great and the problems we face and asked members of City Council to listen. It is a simple formula that has yielded thousands of suggestions and ideas for the City to consider.

Listening to Toronto was just the start of our commitment to engage Torontonians. I look forward to many more such discussions in the next three years.

David Miller
Mayor



Listening to Toronto

City of Toronto, 2004

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About Listening to Toronto

Between January 17 and 24, 2004, Mayor David Miller, Councillor David Soknacki and members of Toronto City Council were listening to Toronto.

More than 1,100 people attended seven sessions across the City in facilitated, small group discussions. They were asked three questions:

- What things make Toronto great, and why is it important that we not lose them?
- What challenges do we face, and why is it urgent that we address them?
- What advice do you have for City Council as it discusses the 2004 budget?

The answers to the questions reflect the diversity of experience and opinion that's expected from a cross-section of residents. When participants were asked to identify things that make Toronto great, they generated a long list. Toronto's diversity, its natural environment, its neighbourhoods and the transit system were mentioned time and time again. So too were the city's vibrant cultural

life, its relative safety compared to other big cities, the community's feeling of compassion and civility, its economic diversity and valuable municipal services.



It's clear from *Listening to Toronto* that the city also has a number of challenges. Addressing homelessness and the lack of affordable housing was considered a priority at every session. Some of the things identified as Toronto's strengths – community safety, transit and the environment – were also named as top challenges, reflecting Torontonians' desire to prevent any further erosion of these important elements of the city's livability.

When asked to give advice to Council to consider during its debate on the 2004 City budget, ideas were generated in many different areas. A majority of participants supported ideas such as seeking the appropriate financial tools, powers and financial support from the federal and

provincial governments, improving accountability, transparency and community involvement in allocation decisions, and ensuring that Council carefully considers the impact of all budget decisions on the most vulnerable.

A number of topics generated differing opinions, reflecting the range of views among Torontonians. These included topics such as contracting out, access to the commercial/industrial tax base, residential tax increases, and user fees.

A synopsis of the range of opinions is presented on the following pages. A transcript of all participants' comments has been compiled in a separate volume available at www.toronto.ca/listeningtotoronto.

Question 1 - What things make Toronto great, and why is it important that we not lose them?

Diversity

The City's motto is "Diversity, Our Strength" and Torontonians agree. People are proud of our city's cosmopolitan feel.

- Toronto is welcoming to newcomers
- Toronto is one of the few cities that can boast both diversity and cohesiveness
- Newcomers bring talent, expertise, different ideas and perspectives
- Gives us a competitive advantage in doing business in other countries
- It sets Toronto apart from other cities
- There is a willingness to learn, respect and understand each other's cultures
- Our diversity attracts visitors

Our Natural Environment

Not surprisingly, Torontonians are proud of our city's natural setting. Our lakefront setting makes us different than many other cities.

- Toronto's waterfront provide lots of recreational opportunities and has great potential
- People love our parks, ravines, river valleys, trees, wildlife and other natural features
- The Toronto Islands are a major community asset
- Bike and walking trails knit our city together and give people the chance to experience nature
- Helps attract visitors to Toronto
- There are lots of opportunities to remain active and healthy

Neighbourhoods

When you ask people what makes Toronto great, it doesn't take long for them to describe Toronto as a "city of neighbourhoods". People like to identify themselves as both Torontonians, and residents of their own unique neighbourhood.

- Toronto's neighbourhoods help foster a sense of community belonging and identity
- Strong neighbourhoods enhance community safety
- Toronto's neighbourhoods are open to people from other parts of the city
- In Toronto, you can live and work in the same place
- Toronto has been able to maintain a thriving, liveable downtown
- As seen during several events of the past year or two, Toronto's neighbourhoods pull together in a crisis
- There is a good social infrastructure including libraries, community centres, schools and health centres
- People generally feel they have a say on neighbourhood issues

Transit

Torontonians consider transit to be one of greatest assets and one of our greatest challenges.

- The TTC is safe, clean and relatively affordable
 - Transit gives people choice in the way they choose to get around the city
 - The transit system's coverage gives people choice in neighbourhoods in which to live or locate a business
 - Transit increases mobility for seniors and young people
 - Transit helps reduce dependence on cars and the resulting pollution and environmental degradation
 - Wheel Trans is an essential lifeline for persons with disabilities
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Cultural Life

Toronto is home to an impressive array of cultural activities. People had no trouble listing attractions, events or historic sites that make this city great.

- There is plenty of cultural activity for all ages and income levels
 - There is a wonderful mix of cultural activity – professional and amateur, big and small, downtown and neighbourhood-based
 - Toronto is home to many major international cultural events, showcasing our city to the world
 - There are many wonderful public spaces and areas of historic interest
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Safety

Safety is both a source of pride, and a growing concern for people in Toronto. Despite the challenges that lay ahead, people generally feel that Toronto is a relatively safe city for its size and population.

- In Toronto, people feel comfortable on the streets of Toronto, even at night
 - Toronto is a city where maintaining safety is taken seriously
 - Toronto's downtown doesn't empty out after work like many other cities
 - There's lots of life on Toronto streets seven days a week
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A Civil Society

Torontonians are proud of how we care for one another and pull together in difficult times. It is these qualities that attracts people from other places.

- There is a tradition of volunteerism, community involvement
 - There is freedom of religion, political viewpoint, expression
 - Torontonians are tolerant, compassionate and caring
 - Torontonians care about the disadvantaged, vulnerable persons
 - Everyone can participate in civic life
 - Everyone can live out their ideals
 - Issues and conflicts are resolved through peaceful, democratic processes
 - Political pluralism, activism thrives in Toronto
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Economic Diversity

Toronto is economically dynamic, benefiting the city, region and nation.

- Toronto benefits by being the economic engine of Canada
 - There is a good mix of neighbourhood businesses and international headquarters
 - Toronto's strong economy allows for a high quality of life and contributes to high levels of services
 - Its diversity provides many different career and job opportunities
 - There are opportunities to pursue specialized fields
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City Services

People listed many of the city's services as a benefit to the people who live, work and play in Toronto.

- Our emergency service workers – police, fire and emergency medical services – have a tough job and deserve a good deal of respect.
 - Commonly mentioned services include libraries, parks and recreation facilities, youth and children's programming, public health services
 - Schools and other educational institutions are cherished and people prize the quality of education programs
 - Toronto is a great city for families
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Question 2 - What challenges face our city and why is it urgent we address them?

Homelessness and Housing

People think that homelessness is a serious problem and getting worse. Many point to the need for affordable housing.

- We have become too desensitized, accepting of a society in which people live on the streets
 - Not enough focus on root causes of homelessness
 - There is a perception that there has been erosion of social programs for homeless, disabled and mentally ill
 - Our failure to act on homelessness reflects badly on the city's image and hurts business and tourism
 - Need to address health and safety issues in shelters
 - There is not enough affordable housing in Toronto
 - Toronto Community Housing is overcrowded
 - Waiting lists for social housing are too long
 - For some, there is too much concentration of low-income housing in parts of the city
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Transportation and Transit

People point to two main challenges: gridlock on our roads and a deteriorating transit system.

- There is too much gridlock and congestion – this hurts business, the environment, and people's health
 - Need to get more people out of their cars and onto transit
 - TTC is too expensive for many, especially while service declines
 - The TTC is not properly funded by senior governments
 - There are service gaps in parts of the city, e.g., in the outer parts of the city
 - There is a lack of coordination, integration between the TTC and 905 transit systems
 - Remember that not everyone can use transit to get around
 - There is too much illegal parking, impeding traffic and transit
 - More needs to be done to make Toronto cycle and pedestrian friendly
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Crime, Policing and Safety

Although safety was mentioned as one of the things that makes Toronto great, people are concerned the city is becoming less safe.

- Too many guns
 - Violence, gang culture on the rise
 - Too many young men are dying
 - Some are losing confidence in the Police Service
 - More focus needed on community policing
 - We need to acknowledge racial profiling is a problem
 - Some feel the justice system is too lax
 - Not enough locally responsive policing
 - Not enough focus on crime prevention – e.g., not enough youth programs
 - Need to do more to build bridges between police and youth
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The Environment

People think environmental issues are a major challenge for our city.

- Air quality is deteriorating
 - Too many smog alerts
 - Too many trees being removed for development
 - Rivers and Lake Ontario are too polluted
 - Too much energy is wasted in office buildings
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Accountable City Government

People want to know more about decision making and how municipal government works.

- Need to rebuild trust, confidence, accountability in City Hall
- Many feel that self-interest of the few prevails over community interest too often at City Hall
- Citizens need more voice in government
- Citizen need to better understand how Council sets its priorities

City's Financial Health

People understand that the City is hard-pressed to meet the demands of a diverse city given the current financial context.

- The City doesn't have the right revenue sources to match the services it provides
- City doesn't have full control of the revenue sources it does have
- Need to stop the erosion of the city's industrial assessment and employment base
- Need to stem the tide of business leaving Toronto

City Services

People made many suggestions to improve services or close service gaps.

- Need to address our decaying infrastructure; e.g. sewers, bridges, and roads
- Some services are not distributed equitably across the city
- Not enough focus on health prevention
- Not enough access to school and community spaces
- Not enough services for seniors in their own language
- Too much litter on the streets
- Exporting garbage to Michigan reflects badly on Toronto

Income Disparity

People thought the City should do more to combat poverty.

- There is a growing gap between rich and poor in Toronto
- Neighbourhoods are polarizing
- Too many children living in poverty
- There is a concern we are criminalizing poverty and victimizing children, people with mental health problems and the poor

Access to Employment

Many think the City should take a leadership role in encouraging employers to make the best use of the city's human resources.

- Despite the city's acceptance of diversity, Toronto is not free of racism and intolerance
- Not enough language, job skill education for adult immigrants
- Foreign-trained professionals can't get jobs
- Immigrants are underemployed, skills underused

Urban Design and Planning

People want the City to do a better job at planning and managing urban growth.

- Some feel there is not enough density to maximize the existing infrastructure, while others are concerned about overdevelopment in areas where infrastructure is lacking
 - Need more planning for population growth
 - Need to find the right balance between public and private interests when it comes to development
 - Some are concerned that there is an inequitable distribution of development across the city
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Question 3 - What advice would you offer to City Council as it discusses the 2004 budget?

Provincial and Federal Partners

People recognize that the City has had to take on more service responsibilities, even though it has been given no new sources of revenue. They expect the different levels of government to work together to best serve the public interest.

- Stand up for Toronto – involve residents in advocating for the City
 - Have more of the taxes raised here, stay here
 - Build stronger relationships with the provincial and federal governments in order to secure more funding
 - Seek improved funding for services downloaded to the City
 - Upload some services
 - Get access to new and more stable revenue sources: gas tax, sales tax, income tax
 - Seek access to the full property tax base – eliminate Bill 140
 - Get authority to issue municipal bonds
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The Role of City Government

People expect the government to focus on the common good, while keeping the bigger picture in mind.

- Government is not a business
 - Ensure that the public interest is paramount
 - Maintain a city-wide perspective
 - Balance social, economic and environmental priorities
 - Think long-term, look beyond the short-term, in solving issues
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Public Participation

People value opportunities to participate in government and in their communities and neighbourhoods. There is an expectation that the voice of the community will be heard on important civic issues.

- Continue and increase public engagement efforts
 - Public input is important in making policy, planning services and setting priorities
 - Seek creative solutions through public input
 - Strengthen community networks and partnerships
 - Encourage volunteerism to support City programs and initiatives
 - People have an interest in civic affairs, but it needs nurturing
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Accountability

People expect the City to operate in an open and responsible manner. They want to hear from their elected representatives and be informed about the City and its work.

- Ensure the decision making process is open and accessible
 - Have Council meet periodically in other areas of the city
 - Consult communities that will be affected by decisions
 - Inform and educate the public about service and budget issues
 - Use plain language to improve accessibility
 - Monitor city performance, and allow outside scrutiny
 - Justify major spending decisions to the public
 - Ensure integrity in government
 - Reduce influence from lobbyists
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Prevention

People recognize the benefits of addressing underlying causes instead of paying for programs and services after problems develop.

- Investing in prevention may cost more to start, but pays off over time
- Focus on root causes
- Invest in the future by investing in education and programs for children and youth
- Shift resources to programs and services that help prevent poverty, homelessness and hunger
- Provide opportunities for working families to improve well-being
- Weigh the societal value of programs against their costs
- Balance enforcement and inspection services with prevention

Equity

People value a caring and compassionate city. They are supportive of efforts to address inequities.

- Protect the most vulnerable when addressing financial issues
- Focus on high needs in our communities and neighbourhoods
- Promote and invest in our diversity
- Work to close the gap between the rich and the poor
- Ensure services are accessible by people with special needs
- Value the young and elderly
- Ensure equitable access to services
- Equity and equality are not the same

Wise Use of Resources

People want assurance that they can entrust public assets to the City. They are interested in exploring creative and innovative ways of using resources.

- Spend for impact
- Improve coordination in Council decision making
- Consider diversity objectives in purchasing process
- Find more creative ways to borrow and raise funds
- Some people suggested selling surplus assets
- Others recommended avoiding the sale of assets – it won't address ongoing financial problems
- Use vacant land and buildings for other program needs before selling
- Improve and maintain what we have
- Make better use of existing community facilities, schools, public spaces
- Invest for long-term savings: energy conservation, health promotion

Efficiency

People recognize that City revenues are limited. They expect program and service objectives to be achieved in an efficient and economic manner.

- Ensure services are effective and provide value for money
- Base expenditures on needs assessments and a good rationale
- Get input from front-line workers on service improvements and efficiencies
- Look for economies of scale, find partners to increase purchasing power
- Review all budgets in detail to find savings, particularly large programs
- Eliminate duplication, cut red tape
- Don't cut or gut services just for the sake of savings
- Conduct program reviews to identify streamlining, restructuring and efficiencies
- Hold the line on Councillor and staff salaries
- Pay staff better to attract the best
- Use staff, avoid spending on consultants
- Use technology to reduce costs and improve access to service
- Focus on preventative maintenance

City Services

People want the City to explore better ways to deliver services, and consider eliminating low-priority or non-essential activities. Many people are concerned about contracting-out; privatization remains a controversial issue.

- Some people are concerned that contracting-out reduces service quality and public control
- Others are interested in looking at all service delivery options for savings
- Focus on service improvement rather than contracting-out
- Use benchmarks to monitor service effectiveness and efficiency
- Raise quality of services – don't equalize to the lowest service level
- Make services more customer-oriented
- Expand profitable city programs: parking authority, Toronto Hydro
- Consider stopping low priority programs: plowing sidewalks, underused programs
- Protect essential services such as health, safety, welfare, programs for children and youth, affordable transit

Policing

Police Services was the subject of considerable public discussion, with a variety of opinions offered. There was surprise at the size of the police budget and its proportion of the overall City budget.

- Opinion divided on increases, reductions to police budget
- Community safety remains an important service objective
- Police services decision-making should be more open & accessible to the public
- Police resources should be shifted to increase foot patrols
- Police budget should be subject to same reduction targets as other programs
- Police budget should be reviewed in detail to identify savings and efficiencies
- There is interest in improving accountability of the police to City Council

The Environment

People value a clean and healthy environment. They are concerned about pollution and environmental degradation, and support individual and collective efforts to improve the quality of our environment.

- Make green decisions
- Create a culture of civic responsibility for a cleaner environment
- Reduce the City government's impact on the environment
- Expand the park system and open/green spaces
- Make the waterfront great
- Accelerate waste diversion, and encourage waste reduction at source
- Promote energy conservation and green power
- Improve transit to help reduce car emissions and smog
- Promote liveability

User Fees

People recognize that the City is increasingly dependent on user fee revenue. There is concern about the effects of user fees on service access, and increasing user fees is a controversial issue.

- Opinion is divided on whether user fees should be based on services consumed, or on ability to pay (sliding scale)
- There is concern that user fees reduce access to services and have a negative effect on low income families
- People support user fees to change negative behaviour
- There is interest in increasing fees for some services: water, parking, services used by non-residents, garbage disposal
- There is interest in harmonizing user fees across the city

Property Taxes

People recognize that property taxes are the City's main revenue source. They are concerned that continuing to increase property taxes may be unaffordable and inequitable, and there are differences of opinion on the best way to proceed.

- Opinion is divided on increasing residential property taxes, and on restoring the City's ability to increase commercial taxes
- Some people feel property taxes are already too high
- Some people are willing to pay more if they see their money well spent
- Some people want to maintain fair tax policies for businesses
- There is some support for holding tax increases at or below the rate of inflation
- There is some interest in making the property tax system fairer and more progressive – tax income rather than the value of a fixed asset (a house)
- There is some support for providing property tax relief for seniors

New Sources of Revenue

People appreciate the limited revenue sources available to the City. They are interested in exploring other innovative ways of raising revenue, and a variety of ideas were suggested.

- Consider establishing a Toronto lottery or local casino
- Consider a hotel tax to be used to support tourism
- Promote economic development to expand the commercial tax base
- Align development charges with those in the 905 area
- Improve opportunities for donations, consider a charitable foundation for the City
- Opinion is divided on introducing road tolls
- Consider selling the City's air rights
- Consider launching a municipal bank or savings office
- Consider a special levy to reduce the budget gap





Participant Feedback

- Seven Listening to Toronto sessions were conducted between January 17 and 24, 2004 and were attended by 1,100 people from across the City
- In addition over 140 e-mails and letters were received
- 80% of the session participants completed a feedback form
- Of those that responded:
 - 97% agreed they had the opportunity to contribute their ideas
 - 77% said they felt the Mayor and Councillors were listening, but many were cautious, commenting that "time will tell" and "we will wait and see"
 - 89% agreed the session was worth attending
 - 89% agreed it was a good way to communicate with the Mayor and Council
 - When asked if the financial challenges faced by Council were clear, 59% said clear and 35% said somewhat clear
 - 88% said they would participate again in these sessions

