



Budget Committee  
City of Toronto  
100 Queen Street West, 10<sup>th</sup> Floor, West Tower  
Toronto, ON M5H 2N2

November 29, 2023


Attention: Councillor Shelley Carroll  
Chair, Budget Committee  
By email: [buc@toronto.ca](mailto:buc@toronto.ca)

Dear Councillor Carroll and members of the Budget Committee,

**This letter is submitted to support the critical need for investment in community safety and well-being in the 2024 City of Toronto Budget. Downtown Yonge Business Improvement Area (DYBIA) BIA believes that economic recovery is underpinned by community safety, and for our downtown neighbourhood, we specifically ask that the Budget support initiatives that address this in a cohesive way:**

- 1. Funding the Toronto Police Service to improve emergency response times and invest in both community and neighbourhood policing;**
- 2. Expanding the Toronto Community Crisis Service to become a city-wide emergency response; and**
- 3. Funding the City's recently-released mental health, substance use, harm reduction and treatment strategy: *Our Health, Our City*.**

Downtown Yonge Business Improvement Area (DYBIA), with a membership of some 2,000 businesses and property owners and a combined commercial property value of \$7.2 billion, is one of the City's largest BIAs. We have been actively investing in a safe and inclusive neighbourhood since 2015, notably through collaborative partnerships that include social agencies, businesses, police and other community stakeholders. We also note that Downtown Yonge supports activities that generate over \$850 million in annual revenues for different levels of government, including, among other things, commercial property taxes.

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Our most recent Strategic Plan 2023-2028 - developed over the past year with input from businesses, property owners and a wide range of community stakeholders - highlights a need for a "back to basics" focus with three key priorities:

1. Creating a safe, clean and welcoming environment for all.
2. Championing diverse businesses, experiences and communities.
3. Prioritizing ease of access for businesses, visitors and residents.

For reference, the full report can be accessed here: <https://downtownyonge.com/strategic-plan/>

As part of our commitment to those goals, which build on our *Safe & Inclusive Streets Strategy 2017*, we have funded a full-time crisis outreach team called the Community Engagement Team (CET) since Summer 2018. Our police partners at 51 and 52 Divisions have been part of this program from the beginning. We also coordinate partnered outreach, initiated during the pandemic, to maximise access to resources for clients on-street. The CET continues to work with a range of partners in Downtown Yonge to provide several collaborative, on-street outreach sessions each week. During 2023, we undertook weekly sessions with eight different, regular partners including various social agencies, harm reduction and housing workers, TTC Special Constables and the Yonge Neighbourhood Community Officers (NCOs).

Despite these efforts, and while our commitment to our most vulnerable community members is unwavering, Downtown Yonge is increasingly perceived as a neighbourhood that is unsafe. This is a serious reputational risk that compromises the health and well-being of our residents, employees, businesses, visitors and students as well as those seeking services. The rise in behaviours related to substance use, mental illness, poverty and homelessness on-street – compounded and magnified by the pandemic – negatively impacts on perceptions of safety and inclusion of Downtown Yonge. We increasingly see open drug use, erratic and aggressive behaviours, shootings, assaults on retail and security staff in the area as well as the victimization of extremely vulnerable people who are on-street because of these same social challenges.

**These challenges must be tackled in tandem: with policing and social services both of equal importance, hence our ask that the Budget prioritize police and mental health crisis response, as well as investment in *Our Health, Our City*.**

DYBIA tracks community safety in our annual *Safe & Inclusive Streets Survey*, which we started in 2018 and which seeks input from residents, students, business and property owners, social agencies, employees and visitors to the neighbourhood. The Fall 2023 survey highlighted significant concerns for our businesses in particular:

- Since March 2023, 59% of business owners feel safety in Downtown Yonge has gotten worse.
- Notably, 66% of respondents reported that vandalism, graffiti and deliberate damage to property was a very or fairly big problem in the neighbourhood – a 17% increase since 2018.
- Furthermore, business and property owners reported a higher victimization rate. Some 24% of business owners and 33% of commercial property owners report being a victim of theft in the past 12 months.
- Perhaps even more worrisome is that 26% of business owners and 11% of commercial property owners report being the victim of a violent crime in the past 12 months.
- 35% of business owners and 56% of commercial property owners have witnessed at least one violent crime in past 12 months.

In short, we see social challenges, crime and perceptions of safety all worsening. We believe strongly that these issues of safety and inclusion need to be tackled collaboratively and through active partnerships that include social agencies, residents' groups, police, schools and the business community.

At the same time, the ongoing lack of police resources have resulted in an increasing risk of harm to our community and the city at large:

- Emergency calls to police have increase by 18% in 2023;
- Far longer emergency response times – currently 22 minutes to respond to a Priority 1 call;
- A cutback of community policing at divisions throughout the City; and
- An increase in major crime of some 21% in 2023 to date.

Finally, although we are seeing some promising signs of economic recovery, the Office Occupancy Index for the downtown core, as reported by Strategic Regional Research Alliance (SRRA), remains at 56% as at November 15 15, 2023. Foot traffic along Yonge Street in Downtown Yonge remains at 10-15% below 2019 levels. These factors are a concern for many businesses that depend on employees and foot traffic for their survival.

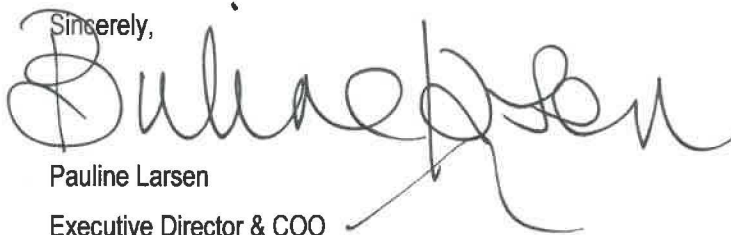
We also note that the six, large BIAs in downtown Toronto identified safety as one of three priorities for the economic recovery of the downtown in a letter to Mayor Chow dated July 24, 2023 and which is appended here.

As always, DYBIA stands ready and willing to play our part in both economic recovery and community safety and well-being:

- We are working with the City's 10-year community safety and well-being program, SafeTO, to identify community safety concerns for BIAs throughout the city;
- We will continue to invest in crisis outreach as we have done since 2018;
- In partnership with the BIA Office at the City, we will continue to offer de-escalation training for streetfront businesses throughout Toronto as we have done since 2020;
- We will continue to participate in the Yonge-Dundas operations and leadership tables;
- We will continue to provide resources for those seeking access to social programs and to those wondering how to report different incidents.

**Thank you for the opportunity to submit this letter to support the critical need for investment in community safety and well-being in the 2024 City of Toronto Budget and specifically that the Budget address this is a cohesive way, including police, mental health crisis response and the longer-term *Our Health, Our City Strategy*.**

Sincerely,



Pauline Larsen  
Executive Director & COO

July 24, 2023



**BLOORYORKVILLE**

**TO:**  
Mayor Olivia Chow



**FROM:**  
Downtown Six Toronto BIAs



## **RE: COMMITMENT TO A THRIVING AND COMPETITIVE DOWNTOWN**

Mayor Chow,

On behalf of our Downtown Six BIAs, congratulations on your swearing in as Mayor of Toronto! We look forward to working with you and your team to ensure Toronto's downtown and its business communities continue to be a thriving destination for residents, workers, and visitors.

Thank you again for meeting with us on May 29, 2023 to discuss our joint statement to candidates, which we have included with this letter.

As we discussed in May, our six Downtown Toronto BIAs meet regularly to coordinate advocacy and support for programs that impact the entire downtown. These programs support the growth of Toronto as a destination and as a visitor economy, by addressing safety and security, transportation investment, and construction mitigation.

Once your team is settled in, we would appreciate the opportunity to meet to discuss where we can continue to work together in support of our shared objectives, including in coordination with other levels of government. We recommend inviting John Kiru, Executive Director of the Toronto Association of Business Improvement Areas (TABIA) who speaks on behalf of BIAs across the city.

Respectfully submitted,

*Al Smith*, Executive Director  
**St. Lawrence Market Neighbourhood BIA**

*Briar de Lange*, Executive Director  
**Bloor-Yorkville BIA**

*Grant Humes*, Executive Director  
**Toronto Financial District BIA**

*Janice Solomon*, Executive Director  
**Toronto Downtown West BIA**

*Pauline Larsen*, Executive Director and COO  
**Downtown Yonge BIA**

*Tim Kocur*, Executive Director  
**The Waterfront BIA**

cc: John Kiru, Executive Director, Toronto Association of BIAs (TABIA)

**Attachment:**

*Statement submitted to 2023 Mayoral by-election candidates and discussed with Mayor Olivia Chow on May 29, 2023.*

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## **CALL FOR CITY OF TORONTO MAYORAL CANDIDATES COMMITMENT TO A THRIVING AND COMPETITIVE DOWNTOWN**

Toronto's Downtown Business Improvement Areas (BIAs) represent neighbourhoods that include Canada's largest employment centre, its busiest transit hub, and vibrant concentrations of retail, hospitality, arts, culture, and tourism. Our downtown core continues to face challenges following the pandemic. 450,000 people worked in the downtown core prior to the pandemic. Our city needs a new Mayor committed to ensuring that the downtown core is welcoming for both returning workers and visitors by creating a plan, exhibiting leadership and working in collaboration with all levels of government.

### **STREETS AND COMMUTES THAT ARE INCLUSIVE, SAFE AND WELCOMING**

The need for supportive housing, mental health and addiction services, and increased downtown security has been more visible on the street as the presence of workers and visitors decreased in downtown during the pandemic. We need a clear focus on providing housing and mental health solutions across the entire City of Toronto and the GTHA, and a commitment to ensuring transit is safe.

### **SUPPORTING DOWNTOWN AS AN INTERNATIONAL DESTINATION FOR BUSINESS, RESIDENTS, WORKERS AND VISITORS**

The pandemic has changed the nature of every business and how they serve employees, customers and visitors. This is a higher cost environment. The post-pandemic economy requires a fair, equitable and transparent tax environment that does not punish one group of businesses over another. This includes sharing burdens of new service and investment across the entire City and province, and across all tax classes.

### **TRANSIT INVESTMENTS TO ENSURE RETURN (AND GROWTH) OF THE DOWNTOWN WORKFORCE**

A healthy, thriving Toronto region relies on an expansion of job opportunities with transit access. We will need to see all three levels of government continue to invest in new transit access. Fare integration must be achieved to reduce barriers to employment downtown. Construction mitigation will become even more important, and we must include direct support of businesses impacted to provide a chance to survive and thrive afterwards.