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Comment by Karen Stintz: On A Toronto That Works

A recent report by the Board of Trade highlighted that Toronto is not living up to our brand as a livable city that works. For those who live and work in Toronto, this disappointment is being replaced by frustration and anger. Frustration as we spend too much time talking about bags, bottles and bicycles instead of the real issues. And anger, as residents struggle to cope with a strike that continues into a third week and in many ways, has become symbolic of a Toronto that is not working for Torontonians.

Mayor Miller says that the city's budget is in crisis. Because of this, the city can't make ends meet without major concessions on the part of its 30,000 workers.

And yet, when a contract agreement was reached with workers at the Toronto Community Housing in April, there was no confrontation, and no demand for major concessions. Instead of sending a signal that the city needs belt-tightening, it was business as usual. Also consider that four months ago, the Mayor passed the largest year over year increase to our budget in the city's history, including the hiring of 1,300 new employees.

Indeed, the city has not managed its finances. In 2003, Toronto's budget was about \$7-billion. In 2009, it has grown close to \$9-billion. Expenditures have been growing at double the rate of inflation for Mayor Miller's entire time in office and City Council has consistently spent more than it takes in through revenues. Our debt has almost doubled. A host of new taxes has been added.

These are not the actions of a model, leading edge city.

We should not spend our time imposing fees for plastic bags when we have no legal ability to do so and at the same time ban biodegradable bags. Nor should we spend time talking about water bottles and coffee cups because of a decision to purchase a landfill that is now resulting in a host of irrational policies around garbage disposal. We certainly should not base a transportation plan on putting bicycle lanes on major roadways that carry 130 bikes and 27,000 cars.

We need to get back to the basics of what city government is supposed to do: providing a modern, reliable transit system; cost-effective and hassle free garbage collection; police and fire services with resources to respond quickly; sewer and water services; daycare services, libraries, parks and museums. The list goes on.

It would help if we knew exactly how much is spent on each of the different services the city provides. Where the revenue comes from and where it goes. Then we could have a better discussion about what we can do to make sure we get the services we actually want, in the best possible way. Consider that the TTC is one of the largest items in our budget and about to get an injection of \$9-billion. Now more than ever, we need manage taxpayer investments in the best possible way.

We also need to take a critical look at our assets. There is significant value tied up in Enwave, Toronto Hydro and the Parking Authority. Unlocking some of this value could help us pay down our debt, invest in our roads, or build new parks and community centres. Alternatively, we could be using our assets in better ways. Union Station should be developed as a train station to service the region's transportation needs, not turned into a shopping mall.

We need to build a city where we are once again leaders in transportation, quality of life and municipal pride. We need to have a government that delivers services for the people who live and work here. We need to have a Toronto that works.

- Karen Stintz is councillor for Ward 16 (Eglinton-Lawrence). This was adapted from a speech to the Economic Club of Canada