

Report calls for city to ease business regulations

Toronto trade board says next mayor and council must work to reduce red tape

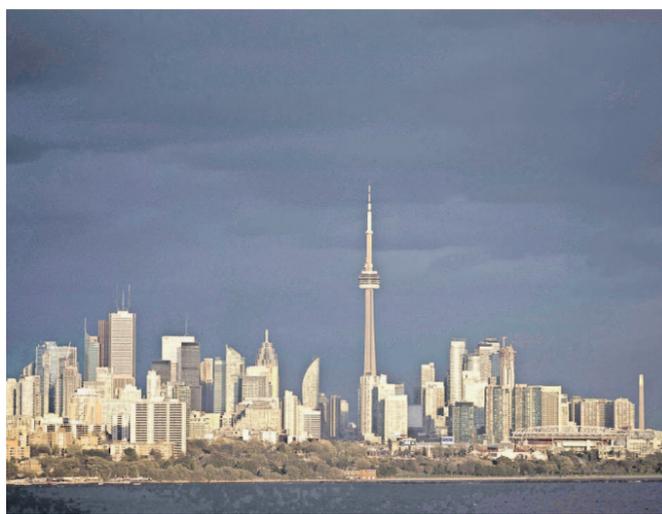
JEFF GRAY
TORONTO CITY HALL REPORTER

Toronto needs to slash red tape and slow property-tax hikes for business in order to keep its economy moving as it faces challenges beyond its control that range from uncertainty over trade with the U.S. to higher energy costs, a new report says.

The Toronto Region Board of Trade, in the latest of a series of short policy papers intended to spark debate during the city's municipal election, says the next mayor and council need to redouble efforts to reduce unnecessary regulations on business.

The board says staff in the mayor's office and an individual city councillor should be appointed to head up efforts to reduce red tape and streamline government by allowing businesses to apply for more permits and licences online.

For example, the report says, businesses seeking licences can only apply for them in person at the former city hall in East York, outside of Toronto's downtown, in a "frustrating, half-day process."



A new report says Toronto needs to work to eliminate overlapping or 'cosmetic' rules placed on businesses. MARK BLINCH/THE CANADIAN PRESS

The city should also eliminate overlapping, unenforceable or "cosmetic" rules, the report says.

"Toronto consistently ranks as one of the world's most attractive cities for business investment with its high standard of living and educated work force," Jan De Silva, the president and chief executive of the Board of Trade, said in a statement. "We risk losing our advantage if Toronto's next council does not implement a plan to maintain it."

The report also calls on the next council to dedicate itself to

rebalancing the share of taxes paid by business in relation to residential taxpayers. Compared with surrounding municipalities, more of Toronto's tax burden is borne by businesses than by the city's residents.

Council committed to a long-term plan to slow down property-tax hikes for business back in 2005 when David Miller was mayor. The goal was to gradually bring the proportion of the property-tax burden in the city down to a ratio of 2.5 to 1 by 2020. It is currently 2.7 to 1, meaning that for ev-

ery tax dollar paid by residential taxpayers, business pays \$2.70. The policy did not decrease tax rates for business, it just raised them more slowly each year than residential rates.

However, in 2017's budget squeeze, the city reneged on this plan. The Board of Trade says future budgets must not recommit to the same gradual change, but aim to reduce the burden businesses pay even further by 2022, to 2.4 to 1. Even then, businesses will be paying a larger share of Toronto property taxes than they do in many other cities, the board says.

"Considering the competitiveness headwinds Toronto now faces, it's time to get this policy back on track," the report reads.

The report also recommends protecting land in Toronto that is zoned for employment, and resisting the urge to allow parcels of land to be rezoned for condominiums. According to the report, Toronto could run out of industrial land by 2031.

Keerthana Kamalavasan, a spokeswoman for John Tory's campaign, said the city had made strides under the mayor's leadership on creating a good climate for business. While city council did alter its long-standing policy on the business-tax ratios in 2017 in order to recoup revenue lost when the province froze rates for the multi-residential sector, she

said the city is still on track to meet the policy's target ratio in 2023.

If re-elected, she said, Mr. Tory would push for a "one-window online service" for business licences, service requests and taxes.

"The mayor is committed to making Toronto a business-friendly city," Ms. Kamalavasan said in an e-mail. "Our reputation and standing around the globe have never been stronger. Businesses are flocking here to invest and hire our talent. Just last week we saw Microsoft, Uber and Intel expand their footprint in Toronto."

Jennifer Keesmaat, the city's former chief planner who is challenging Mr. Tory for the mayor's job, said her plans to help businesses include creating 100,000 units of affordable housing in order to help attract skilled workers to the city. She also pledged to streamline the bylaw and licensing systems – and said Mr. Tory had not done enough.

"John Tory has hurt Toronto's competitiveness with dithering and delay," Ms. Keesmaat said in an e-mailed statement. "In 2014, he made an election promise to get rid of the red tape businesses experience ... and to publish an annual scorecard on progress. Four years later we are still waiting for action on that commitment."

Reimagining the condo and suburban main streets

ALEX BOZIKOVIC

OPINION



In new housing developments, "you often go lowrise, or you go vertical," says architect Lorcan O'Herlihy. "Is there a middle ground? And is there a social benefit in doing that?"

For the Los Angeles-based architect, the answer to those questions is a definite yes. In an effort to rethink some of Toronto's current planning, I asked him and his firm LOHA to reimagine a site on St. Clair Avenue in southwest Scarborough.

The result is a beautiful mid-scaled building that's unorthodox and brilliant. This is a thoughtful architecture to bring density to car-oriented suburbs. LOHA's design challenges the current orthodoxy in two ways: its urban design and its mix of units. It wouldn't be welcomed by planners or politicians – but it should be.

First, the urban design. The site, now two lots, is typical for postwar Toronto. It's zoned for low-density commercial use: basically, strip malls. (This is part of Toronto's outdated zoning bylaw, which has never been coherently rewritten since the city was amalgamated in 1998.) For now, it houses a McDonald's restaurant and a one-storey retail building with a Money Mart and Subway sandwich shop.

Mr. O'Herlihy's firm has confronted sites like this in Los Angeles, and built some complex and beautiful buildings in response. He describes his firm's approach this way: "Can we buck the odds and create fluid interaction between public and private spaces? Can you borrow space from a private development and bring it to the public? Could the edges be blurred?"

In Scarborough, the LOHA proposal is for a combination of mid-rise and highrise, joined by a plaza, and animated by a terraced building form and lots of greenery.

"It's a piece of architecture that



Architecture firm LOHA was asked to reimagine a structure on St. Clair Avenue in Scarborough. NORM LI/LOHA

celebrates all scales," Mr. O'Herlihy says.

There are two front wings, which step up like ziggurats in opposite directions. "Each level has a roof deck or a courtyard space," Mr. O'Herlihy says. "It brings the life of the street up into the building." At one end of the site is a tower; this includes carve-outs for terraces which would feature greenery or trees.

The courtyard is partly shaded and defined by the surrounding buildings. The wings along St. Clair would include street-facing

retail, but ground-level retail also opens to the courtyard – and the building rises into an arch linking the streetscape and courtyard.

In its form, LOHA's building has good manners, but does its own thing. "Rather than respond to some idea of context," Mr. O'Herlihy says, "we create our own context."

"If you build a building that is clearly for people – with roof decks, activated edges, and life inside and outside – it says this isn't only about the car."

That's an ideal that any city

planner would appreciate, but LOHA's chosen form is unorthodox. On sites like this, planners would call for a new condo project to face the road and create a "street wall." They'd ask for a string of stores along the sidewalk, so that people will stroll in to shop, maybe sit for lunch. The idea is to replicate the street life of older, walkable neighbourhoods. And at the back, the building should get as low as possible to blend in with the houses – in this case stacked townhouses – nearby.

The problem with this model is that it doesn't work. Suburban arterial roads such as St. Clair are miserable places to walk. This one has five lanes of noisy, dangerous traffic moving at faster than 60 kilometres an hour. And this area, like most of postwar Toronto, doesn't have enough people to support good retail. Fixing that – making a genuinely walkable neighbourhood – would require massive, comprehensive redevelopment that's not coming anytime soon. Why wait for an idealized future, when you can generate community in the present with good architecture?

Which leads to the second major point: the mix of uses within the building. In new developments, typically a stack of apartments sit atop retail. LOHA's design calls for the entire complex to be units which could be used as homes, workplaces or both. "We have to understand that the way people work is changing," Mr. O'Herlihy says, "in ways that we can't predict." This is against the grain of contemporary planning. In practice, everyone agrees that mixed uses are good, but few planners would propose a totally open mix of uses within a building like this. (Sidewalk Toronto, Google's sister company, is attempting to do so.)

The basic architectural component of the LOHA design is a cube; each unit would have a 12-foot ceiling. Suites with this scale lend themselves to live/work uses. And LOHA is calling for the structural system of these buildings to be concrete post-and-beam, rather than the more common system of concrete slab construction. That would allow units, over time, to be connected horizontally or vertically, bought and sold, linked and separated. "You can mix anything you want in this building," Mr. O'Herlihy says.

Tall and short, but not a slab; organized around a courtyard, but not unfriendly to the street; designed to link indoors and outdoors; completely mixed use and completely physically flexible. "We need to imagine the city of the future," Mr. O'Herlihy argues, "and make room for it."

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