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Here's What the City's Poverty Eradication Plan Has Accomplished in One Year

And the many things it still needs to work on.

BY CHRIS RIDDELL



A lack of affordable housing is one of the problems areas cited in TO Prosperity. Photo by Randy Hoffmann from the Torontoist Flickr Pool.

A little over a year ago, Toronto City Council unanimously approved an ambitious poverty eradication plan called **TO Prosperity**. It's a 20-year plan with numerous action items addressing six problem areas: affordable housing, access to services, transit affordability, quality job creation, affordable food, and systemic change.

Now that we're a year into it, how well has the city stuck to it?

That all depends on whom you ask. Deputy mayor Pam McConnell (Ward 28, Toronto Centre-Rosedale), who is the lead on the **TO Prosperity** file, feels they've gotten off to a strong start, although it might not be immediately obvious to everyday citizens.

"What most people looked at was the new and enhanced programming, but that's not really all of the money spent on poverty reduction," says McConnell. "What's spent on poverty reduction has to also come out of the \$11-billion budget. It isn't just what they added onto small projects. It's also how you use your money smarter with a poverty lens and make sure that you're targeting additional money in those areas."

According to McConnell, in 2016 over \$100 million was directed toward poverty-reducing programs, such as increasing shelter spaces, creating a dental services program, and allowing children under 12 to ride the TTC for free. A youth employment initiative was also put in place, and there were some items that don't cost the city anything, such as a rooming house review.

So if you ask McConnell, things look good. But talk to Councillor Gord Perks (Ward 14, Parkdale-High Park) and you'll hear a much different story.

He feels there are several gaps in the program and the city isn't putting enough dollars towards poverty eradication programs.

"We're not building any meaningful number of affordable housing units, we're not providing childcare to people in sufficient numbers so they can get into the workforce or school, or not have a large portion of their income consumed by housing and childcare, and we're not investing in any significant programs to assist people in getting child care," says Perks.

"Everything has been very small dollars and big promises so far."

As is so often the case with big projects like these in Toronto, it all comes down to money. The city is putting \$1 billion towards reconstructing the eastern portion of the Gardiner Expressway, but that money could instead be directed towards building more affordable housing units. It could be better to put automobile infrastructure projects on hold for a while until the poverty situation has been mitigated.

Another problem that Perks sees is that people in Toronto are very under-taxed compared to the rest of the country. While Mayor John Tory has committed to a below-average inflation rate property tax increase, Toronto homeowners actually pay a far lower property tax rate than the rest of the country. Like it or not, programs like TO Prosperity need funding to come from somewhere, and when it comes to running a city there are few options: either raise taxes and fees (or create new ones) or reallocate funds from somewhere else.

Perks sees a lot of work to be done in affordable housing. The amount of money people on social assistance get isn't enough to cover the cost of maintaining Toronto Community Housing units. As a result, the city is actually losing money on those units. To combat this problem, Perks believes we should ask the provincial government to raise social assistance rates.

Transit affordability is a big concern as well. The TTC is by far the most expensive public transit system in the county, at \$142 for an adult monthly pass, so a geared-to-income Metropass is often suggested as a way of solving this piece of the poverty puzzle.

But the TTC is a special case in the city's budget because it doesn't receive significant subsidies from the provincial and federal governments like, say, Montreal's STM does. The TTC has to charge high fares to fund its operating budget, so reducing fares would result in cutting service and that invariably affects those in low-income areas the most.

"We need to come at it from the income side," says Perks. "I think we should campaign the province to raise social assistance and minimum wage rates because they're too low to live in an expensive city like Toronto."

Moving forward, the 2017 budget includes a 2.6 per cent cut, and that has a lot of people in the community worried—people like Sean Meagher, executive director of Social Planning Toronto. The general feeling is that less budget means less investment in poverty reduction, and if we fall behind now, what should be a 20-year plan will become much longer.

"It was a source of a lot of concern in the community when Council motions were put to protect the investments in poverty from that 2.6 per cent cut, protect people who are living in social housing from the impact of that cut, protect transit affordability from that cut, and all of those were rejected," says Meagher. "If we are to move forward on this, Council needs to support those investments and prioritize that work."

When asked about the effect of this budget cut on the poverty reduction program, McConnell assured us that it won't affect investment at all because the budget dollars for the program are "firewalled," so there's no reason to be concerned. In fact, she has a vision for the next steps in 2017.

"The targets for next year, besides finishing up some of the employment pieces that we need to finish up, such as the living wage, which will be a major discussion next year, but also housing will be highlighted—the renewal, renovation, and building of a new housing plan for TCH. Those are the main pieces of where we are next year."

Affordable child care spaces will also be in the works.

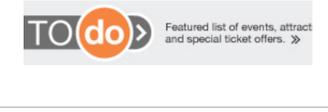
McConnell says she wants to improve the way budget spending is reported to make it more transparent. Hopefully, if she does, more of us will see eye to eye on the state of the poverty eradication plan and work together in what is going to be a long, tough battle.

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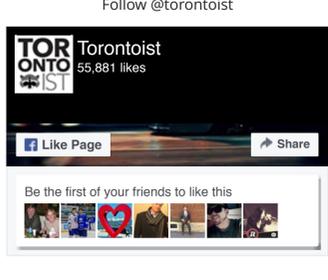
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