

# Bad grade from TEA makes one wonder "What's the point?"

## City Views

East York Mirror  
November 1, 2007  
DAVID NICKLE

It would be a stretch to make a point-for-point comparison of the influence that the Toronto Environmental Alliance has had on city environmental policy in the David Miller years, with the influence which Paul Godfrey and other Conservative power-brokers had on the direction of amalgamated Toronto during Mel Lastman's mayoralty.

But while the Alliance hasn't had anything to do with computer leases, hirings in the senior bureaucracy or sealing touchy intergovernmental deals, the relatively small clutch of environment scientists, activists and lobbyists has had enormous impact on Toronto's environmental policy. Over the decade since amalgamation, they've had a hand in setting the city's solid waste policy, the anti-pesticide bylaw and the tree protection bylaw and advancing a bevy of public transit initiatives.

They've done so well that their former leader, Gord Perks, now has a seat at Toronto council representing Ward 14 (Parkdale-High Park).

Given all that, it's always amusing when TEA - as they're known around city hall - books a committee room and lays out their annual Toronto Smog Report Card for the media.

It might have been a more effective critique when Lastman was mayor to sternly deliver a D or a C- to a city that had other things to worry about than the depleting ozone layer.

But in 2007, four years into the era of David Miller, delivering a C on the city's efforts to combat smog seems a little too much like self-flagellation. You would think, in a year in which the TTC unveiled - and the province agreed to fund - a huge web of light-rail transit spanning the entire city; in which council overwhelmingly approved a climate change plan that is among the most ambitious in North America, that the city would get a nod of encouragement from the environmental sector.

TEA points out that all of that was fine - and would have by itself earned Toronto a B or a B - but for the decision to defer debate on the land transfer tax and vehicle registration tax, which put the city in a hole and delayed implementation of these and other initiatives.

All that's fair enough - the delay in that debate set the city back in all sorts of ways this year and certainly Toronto's environmental agenda slipped down a notch along with everything else.

But if the top mark that the city could expect for a year in which they introduced an ambitious climate change plan and a partially funded light-rail expansion plan is a B, really, what's the point?

More to the point, one wonders how long an organization can maintain its influence, if its sole engagement with the government who shares its goals is through complaint.

The report card even had Perks rolling his eyes.

"Someone's got to introduce them to the concept of a bell curve," Perks said. "Based on that the city I believe the city is one of the two or three tops in terms of implementation in North America. Seattle, Halifax and Chicago are the only other cities in our league and I think we're ahead of them."

With that said, the TEA report does correctly identify the stall in which Toronto finds itself, in the aftermath of the tax debate. It's going to be difficult for the city to accomplish anything in the next year, as it tackles its \$239-million shortfall with an inadequate set of tax tools and a provincial government that seems nowhere near ready to step up to the table and finally pay its fair share.

And TEA does make its critique in the context of climate change and declining air quality; you can't run fast enough from a burning house, and the city or any other level of government can't ever be said to be doing enough to combat climate change.

But for all that, it would be interesting to see what an A in smog-fighting would look like. One thing for sure - it would be expensive.