

COVID-19, the Climate Crisis and the City of Toronto: Submission to the Toronto Office of Recovery and Rebuild

July 2020

The devastating impacts of COVID-19 on Toronto are unparalleled in the City's post-war history. To date, the City has recorded close to 14 000¹ cases and suffered over 1 000¹ COVID-19 related deaths. Beyond the immediate health risk, Torontonians must now contend with soaring unemployment, housing and food insecurity, mobility restrictions and overall increased mental stress. Although infection rates are beginning to decline within the City, a resurgence is entirely possible, further complicating rehabilitation efforts.

We, as climate action organizations working in Toronto, are deeply concerned. Amid this crisis we implore the City to consider a number of recommendations which we feel will hasten Toronto's recovery and assure its revitalization and sustainability. We also believe that the implementation of these recommendations will help prepare the City for the enduring threat of climate change, as solutions to the current health emergency will also serve to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and mitigate their impact. The climate crisis is no longer on the horizon, it's at our doorstep. A 2016 National Round Table on the Environment and the Economy estimated that climate change would cost Canadians approximately \$5 billion in 2020 alone, escalating to between \$21 and \$43 billion per year by 2050, and possibly higher in extreme scenarios³. To avoid global warming of 1.5C or higher, the UN indicates that global emissions need to fall 7 to 8% year by year to 2030. To be a global climate leader, Toronto must act now to meet its 2030 climate target and get on track to reach zero emissions by 2040 or earlier.

We recognize the important work done by the City in response to COVID-19. Programs such as ActiveTO, CurbTO, the expanded bike lane network and the installation of rapid modular housing are key to providing Torontonians the ability to safely physically distance from one another. The

climate co-benefits of ActiveTO, and the increased number of cycling routes, complement the objectives of TransformTO and give meaning to Toronto's climate emergency declaration. We are also encouraged by Mayor Tory's recent endorsement of the C40's *Statement of Principles on COVID-19 Recovery*⁴, in particular principles 1 and 7:

- *The recovery should not be a return to 'business as usual' - because that is a world on track for 3°C or more of over-heating.*
- *We commit to doing everything in our power and the power of our city governments to ensure that the recovery from COVID-19 is healthy, equitable and sustainable.*

Work to be Done

There is however still much work to be done. The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed weaknesses in the very pillars of our essential support systems such as hospitals and long-term care homes. Staffing and equipment shortfalls have had a devastating effect on Toronto's most vulnerable residents, and our social safety net has been overburdened as exemplified by The Daily Bread Food Bank's 53% increase⁵ in demand on its central warehouse inventory. Looking forward, inadequate transit service will lead to overcrowding on many routes, amplifying the risk of recurring waves of COVID-19 infection and making already difficult commutes even more challenging especially in underserved neighbourhoods.

Risks induced by the pandemic are not evenly distributed across the City. A Toronto Public Health map¹ shows that the highest levels of COVID-19 cases are in neighbourhoods with high proportions of low-income, racialized and newcomer populations. COVID-19 is a shock that has compounded multiple, interrelated stresses for residents living in impacted neighbourhoods. To quote from *Toronto's Resilience Strategy*⁷:

Equity-seeking groups face an unequal distribution of opportunities and resources, and therefore face greater challenges preparing for, responding to, and recovering from climate shocks and stresses.

Working Together

TCAN member groups understand that the City of Toronto cannot effectively tackle the challenges of COVID-19 and the climate crisis alone. Federal and provincial financial support is essential, but so too is close cooperation between all three levels of government.

The City must uphold its commitment to engage in a meaningful way with Indigenous people in the recovery process in line with the City's adoption of United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.⁸

Community-led consultations must play a key role in gathering information and in finding appropriate solutions, especially among Indigenous, Black, racialized, people with Disabilities / Disabled people, youth, and other equity-seeking groups.

We also recognize that civil society groups must be fully committed to meaningful consultation, and equipped with financial and logistical support from the City to support it. Private foundations may also have a role to play. Together, we will continue to build strategic partnerships in order to enhance public outreach and provide feedback.

A Better Future for Toronto

Similar to the COVID-19 pandemic, the climate crisis profoundly and directly affects all of us, but also highlights how the prevailing inequity in our society results in great risk and impacts for some residents of our city. Individuals and communities are made vulnerable due to demographic and socio-economic factors, and ongoing experiences of marginalization and discrimination. We must do a better job of addressing inequity both immediately and over the longer term.

Despite the hardship and loss brought on by COVID-19, the City has an opportunity to move forward in a more positive direction. Community groups and individual Torontonians have demonstrated extraordinary compassion for people most in need since the outbreak and a renewed sense of community cohesiveness has taken hold. Community initiatives have been organized around shared interests, pooled resources and communal space. We urge the City to build on this momentum in order to ensure a more livable, viable Toronto. We believe that our best line of defence against future climate shocks is to invest in prevention and preparedness measures now, in order to mitigate the high human and financial costs of inaction later.

Torontonians are not alone in our enhanced aspirations for urban life. Montreal⁹, Vancouver¹⁰ and London England¹¹ are just a few examples of cities which have taken significant steps forward to meet both the COVID-19 pandemic and the climate crisis head-on. We know that Toronto, too, is up to the task.

We therefore put forward the following recommendations. Drawing from the knowledge of emergency management in natural disasters, we foresee Toronto's post-pandemic reimagining taking place over 4 phases: response, recovery, rebuild and resilience.

Overarching recommendations for all phases of response, recovery, rebuild and resilience

Uphold the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples

1. The City should ensure that the recovery and rebuild process and actions address and honour its commitments to consult, cooperate in good faith with, and obtain free, prior

and informed consent (FPIC) from Indigenous People as per Toronto's adoption of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP).

Put Equity First

2. Make advancing equity and confronting anti-Black and anti-Indigenous racism, and all forms of systemic racism, central goals of the recovery by using a rights-based, intersectional gender, race and equity lens in recovery planning and actions, and by ensuring that recovery actions address City community benefits, decent work, and equity commitments.

Accelerate Climate Action

3. Apply a climate lens (as committed to in Toronto's Climate Emergency Declaration) to recovery and rebuild proposals to ensure that all investments and policies advance an equitable transition to a zero-GHG city by 2040 or sooner.

Reject Austerity Measures

4. Commit to maintaining or increasing public service levels in order to protect and improve the health, wellbeing and prosperity of all Torontonians as we overcome the impacts of the pandemic.
5. Advocate for federal and provincial governments for:
 - a) additional emergency funding, sustained funding sources, and
 - b) additional revenue powers for the City to ensure the continued provision of these public services.

Make Health-Driven, Evidence-Informed Decisions

6. The current and future health of Torontonians is determined by key social, economic and environmental factors, many of which governments have the power to change. Just as governments have relied upon direction from public health experts to navigate decision making during this pandemic, the City must continue to apply a public health lens to make urgent, evidence-based, health-driven decisions about climate action.

Ensure Meaningful Resident Participation

7. Enable and support structures to facilitate meaningful participation by residents in decision-making processes through all phases - from recovery through to resilience-building - with clear and transparent processes on how resident feedback will shape City decisions on priorities, plans and investments. Facilitation of, and participation

in, these structures should reflect the city's diverse communities and include members of equity-seeking groups and youth.

Recommendations for Response and Recovery Phases

Fix City Finances

8. Proactively tackle Toronto's fiscal challenges and avoid harmful service cuts during the 2021 City Budget cycle by:
 - a) reallocating spending from low-benefit areas (e.g. expressway reconstruction) to areas that maximize climate and equity benefits;
 - b) assessing and implementing fair, progressive, imaginative, and equitable revenue tools within City powers (e.g. vehicle registration tax, green bonds, and parking lot or stormwater levy) with protections for low-income people; and
 - c) revisit the results from the 2016 City of Toronto Revenue Options Study in order to quickly identify and fast-track revenue tool implementation options.

Ensure Safe Mobility

9. Retain ridership and protect essential workers and other transit users by maintaining safe transit occupancy levels through:
 - a) ensuring transit is accessible and equitably available throughout the city with adequate service levels on surface and underground routes;
 - b) providing safe cycling alternatives to transit users through the rapid implementation of 100km of protected temporary and permanent bike lanes on subway lines and busy bus routes, and the further expansion of the BikeShare program;
 - c) encouraging businesses to adopt and support flexible work arrangements such as telework and flexible work hours; and d) working with school boards to provide safe routes to school with active transportation options.

Ensure Safe Housing and Buildings

10. Immediately take regulatory steps to identify the level of repair and retrofit necessary to preserve and improve the state and performance of Toronto's existing housing stock, particularly pre-1984 single-family and multi-residential buildings, many of which are inaccessible. Regulatory mechanisms and policy incentives should include requirements for building audits, energy labelling, and re-commissioning plans which include deep retrofits that climate-proof buildings and meet Toronto Green Standards while improving building accessibility and ensuring tenants are protected from displacement.
11. Identify immediate steps that can be taken to identify the level of repair and retrofit necessary to preserve and improve the state and performance of Toronto's institutional,

commercial and industrial (ICI) sector buildings, prioritizing institutional buildings that are critical to community health and long-term care, City owned buildings, Toronto Community Housing, and industrial and commercial sectors that require cost-saving upgrades to increase their viability and resilience while protecting the health of workers and reducing emissions.

Create Pathways for a Green Local Economy

12. Engage job-seekers, workers, unions, relevant sectors, and social service agencies in the creation of a low-carbon jobs strategy that supports a decent work agenda, career pathways for equity-seeking groups (including youth training and mentorship programs), incentivizes green entrepreneurship, and the expansion of green industry sectors across Toronto as per the commitment made in the City's Climate Emergency Declaration.
13. Promote local businesses, economic development and low-carbon consumption by launching a 15-minute neighbourhood program so that residents can meet their essential needs - work, shopping, schooling, health, or culture - within 15 minutes of their own doorstep.

Clean the Air

14. Maintain recent improvements in air quality and lower GHG emissions by building on ActiveTO car-free zones to pilot permanent car-free zones in 2021 with the goal of establishing a major zero emission area of the city (as per Toronto's Fossil Fuel Free Streets Pledge) by 2025.

Protect and Expand Greenspace

15. Protect and expand equitable access to greenspace in order to improve residents' physical and mental health, and build climate resilience by:
 - a) protecting existing greenspace;
 - b) creating additional parkland while prioritizing areas where more green space access is most needed;
 - c) planting and better caring for trees on public and private lands;
 - d) ramping up the pace of implementation of green roofs to cool our city; and
 - e) investing in green infrastructure solutions in neighbourhoods facing the highest risk of flooding, extreme heat and other climate-related emergencies.

Recommendations for Rebuild and Resilience Phases

Stimulate Green Jobs

16. Accelerate the expansion of local jobs through a large-scale energy efficiency retrofit program focused on pre-1984 single-family and multi-residential buildings as well as buildings in the institutional, commercial and industrial (ICI) sector. With a job strategy developed and regulatory measures introduced during the Recovery Phase (above), the second stage of the retrofit program can be implemented during the Rebuild and Resilience Phases. Financial, policy, and program support to accelerate building retrofits and increase job opportunities for equity-seeking groups should be provided, in part through easy-access loans and grants for energy efficiency measures (in partnership with federal and provincial governments and utility companies).
17. Create additional green sector jobs by:
 - a) requiring that all new and replacement water and space heating systems be electric as of 2025 (e.g. electric heat pumps);
 - b) requiring green infrastructure solutions on public and private property;
 - c) expediting implementation of Community Energy Plans;
 - d) prioritize and plan for green economic development (e.g. manufacturing, supply chains and the circular economy); and
 - e) implementing circular and green procurement policies for all City of Toronto goods, services, materials and investments

Clean the Air

18. Maintain recent improvements in air quality and lower GHG emissions by accelerating the electrification of vehicles by:
 - a) requiring City vehicles (including the TTC & Wheeltrans), garbage trucks, delivery vehicles, taxis, car-share, school buses, and ride-share vehicles to be zero-emission by 2025;
 - b) banning internal combustion engines from the City by 2030;
 - c) ensuring that electric mobility equitably serves all Torontonians including the Disabled community; and
 - d) providing supports for infrastructure retrofits required to service the expanding electric mobility market.
19. Improve air quality, prioritizing resources and programs to benefit the most polluted areas of the city and/or neighbourhoods where racial and economic inequity have exacerbated environmental and occupational health risks.

Promote Local Food and Reduce Waste

20. Advance implementation of Toronto's urban agriculture strategies including the GrowTO Urban Agriculture Action Plan and launch a city-wide program for small and large-scale food production by:
 - a) increasing community gardens and public growing space for local food growing on public and private lands by 50% by summer 2025, with priority implementation in neighbourhoods with less access to fresh affordable produce;
 - b) increasing support for community-led initiatives that improve healthy food access and innovation in food production (e.g. farmer's markets, good food box programs, garden-sharing programs, aquaponics, and vertical or rooftop gardens);
 - c) protecting, expanding and improving access to arable public land for farms (e.g. Black Creek Community Farm and Downsview Park);
 - d) increasing support for teachers and organizations working on urban agriculture and food system education and programming with children and youth; and
 - e) increasing support for Indigenous-led and Black-led agriculture and land/water stewardship programs.

21. Improve Toronto's food system resilience, local food security and community wellbeing, while decreasing environmental impact. Advance implementation of Toronto's Food Charter, commitment to the Milan Urban Food Policy Pact and actions identified in [Toronto's Food Systems Transformation and Food Strategy 2019 Update](#) by launching a city-wide program to:
 - a) reduce food waste in both residential and commercial settings and promote a circular food economy;
 - b) promote the transition to a plant-based diet;
 - c) strengthen the City's social and food procurement policies to ensure that food workers have safe working conditions, fair wages and access to workplace rights, and that all City divisions prioritize procurement from local, ethnic and diverse, and small-medium scale food suppliers.

22. Rapidly scale and accelerate waste diversion infrastructure, services and policies by:
 - a) increasing organics processing capacity;
 - b) expanding waste diversion services and programs;
 - c) restricting and banning single-use plastics that harm our environment;
 - d) providing guidelines and tips on how to safely use reusable items (e.g. face masks, gloves, bags, take-out containers); and
 - e) supporting community-based circular economy initiatives including 3Rs programs, community-scale composting projects, and resource exchange platforms.

Build and Support Local Resilience

23. Support and build neighbourhood mutual aid and community action as key components of the recovery and resilience strategy. The City should partner with and support community, schools and faith-based hubs in playing a lead role in building strong, economically vibrant, sustainable and resilient neighbourhoods so we are better prepared for future climate shocks and pandemics.

24. Adopt and begin implementing the action plan recommendations within Toronto’s First Resilience Strategy in order to mitigate the human health, economic and environmental impacts of future climate-related emergencies including extreme weather events like flooding, heat waves, and severe storms. Lessons learned from the pandemic response should be integrated into the Resilience Strategy.

The above statement is endorsed by the Toronto Climate Action Network (TCAN). TCAN is a network of over 30 climate action organizations working in Toronto to prevent climate breakdown, strengthen climate resilience, and advance climate justice. See tcan.ca for more information.

Member organizations of the Toronto Climate Action Network (TCAN):

Association for Canadian Educational Resources (ACER)	Green Wave West
Canadian Climate Challenge	Greenpeace Canada
Centre for Social Innovation	Just Earth
Citizens' Climate Lobby – Toronto Chapter	Kids Right To Know & Gen-Earth Event
Climate Change Toronto	Leap U of T
ClimateFast	Noor Cultural Centre
Community Resilience to Extreme Weather (CREW)	Ontario Clean Air Alliance
Council of Canadians (Toronto chapter)	Our Place Initiative
Drawdown Toronto	People's Climate Movement
Ecologos/Water Docs	Project Neutral
Enviromentum	StopPlastics
For Our Grandchildren	Toronto Environmental Alliance
Green 13	Toronto350
Green Majority	Transition Toronto
Green Neighbours 21	Women's Healthy Environments Network (WHEN)

Endnotes:

¹<https://www.toronto.ca/home/covid-19/covid-19-latest-city-of-toronto-news/covid-19-status-of-cases-in-toronto/>

²<https://www.tcan.ca/>

³<https://www.canada.ca/en/services/environment/weather/climatechange/climate-action/economic-analysis.html#ftn1>

⁴<https://www.c40.org/other/covid-task-force>

⁵<https://tfpc.to/news/food-insecurity-toronto-covid19>

⁶<https://www.toronto.ca/city-government/data-research-maps/neighbourhoods-communities/nia-profiles/>

⁷<https://www.toronto.ca/services-payments/water-environment/environmentally-friendly-city-initiatives/resilientto/>

⁸<https://www.toronto.ca/city-government/council/2018-council-issue-notes/indigenous-peoples/>

⁹<https://montrealgazette.com/news/local-news/montreals-summer-plans-an-extra-327-km-of-bike-paths-pedestrian-lanes>

¹⁰<https://vancouver.ca/people-programs/resilient-vancouver.aspx>

¹¹<https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2020/may/15/large-areas-of-london-to-be-made-car-free-as-lockdown-eases>