

Is Mayor Miller getting things done?

The Star's City Hall Bureau examines nine of the major initiatives undertaken by Mayor David Miller's administration and measures their successes

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**VANESSA LU,
PAUL MOLONEY,
JOHN SPEARS, DONOVAN VINCENT**
CITY HALL BUREAU

As Toronto Mayor David Miller reaches the halfway point in his second term, the *Star* assesses the progress of his administration on a range of issues, from generating new revenues to delivering services. Miller has certainly enjoyed wins, like

getting city council to adopt a sweeping climate change plan to reduce greenhouse gases. That means putting a priority on transit, getting people out of their cars, and adding bike lanes. But on some proposals the process of actually getting things done has become weighed down by infighting and inaction. Still, now that the mayor has been given more power and is backed by a hand-picked executive committee, it raises the question whether city hall is just spinning its wheels.



COLIN O'CONNOR/TORONTO STAR FILE PHOTO
Toronto Mayor David Miller speaks at a press conference at City Hall, Aug. 11, 2008.

GARBAGE

THE PLAN

Divert 70 per cent of Toronto's garbage from the dump by 2010, in part by setting up a fee-for-service system that rewards residents who throw out the least.

Advocates

Mayor David Miller and works chair Councillor Glenn De Baermaeker.

STATUS

Single-family homes are already diverting more than 60 per cent of their waste by composting, recycling or other means. The city will add new materials to the blue bin program – foam packaging and plastic grocery bags – in December. New recycling and garbage bins are being delivered to every household in the city, and since Nov. 1 residents are being billed for garbage collection, just as they are billed for water use.

BACK STORY

Big apartment and condominium complexes divert only 18 per cent. City staff have launched a push for recycling and composting systems in big buildings; it will have to succeed to reach the 70 per cent goal. The bins have been a mixed success; many households don't have them or got the wrong size. Retooling garbage collection for 1 million households is a massive job. The magnitude of the exercise swamped information lines and frustrated householders.

WHAT'S NEXT

The next few weeks should show whether the new garbage bin system is suffering temporary teething pains or longer-term problems. Many residents wonder how they'll fare in winter conditions.

SUCCESS OR FAILURE

Mixed.

FOOD

THE PLAN

To make healthy and diverse food available on Toronto streets by the summer of 2008, going beyond traditional hot dog fare.

ADVOCATE

Councillor John Filion, chair of the board of health.

STATUS

No new foods are available yet, but new plans keep coming back to city council for approval.

BACK STORY

Initially, the city considered borrowing \$700,000 to buy 35 carts that it would then lease to vendors, a measure that would prevent "cart conglomerates" from moving in.

Mayor David Miller quickly put a stop to that idea after complaints arose that a cash-poor

city shouldn't be spending money on food carts.

Instead, the city embarked on a long study that included asking interested cart manufacturers to submit plans. Filion sought alternative ways to pay for the carts, such as asking a charitable organization to sign on, but found no support.

City staff came up with a five-year pilot project for 13 carts to start next summer, but it was shelved because it was too complicated and too long.

One problem is that a simple idea became entangled with other city goals, such as ensuring healthy food and creating employment for new immigrants or residents in at-risk neighbourhoods. The city dismissed the idea of simply setting parameters for the carts and having public health regulate them.

WHAT'S NEXT

Council will vote next month on the latest plan: a three-year pilot project to begin next spring with up to 15 permits, plus a one-year pilot project allowing 15 existing hot dog vendors to expand their menus for a \$1,000 fee.

SUCCESS OR FAILURE

Failure.

HOMELESS

THE PLAN

Reduce homelessness and create 1,000 units of affordable housing each year.

ADVOCATE

Mayor David Miller.

STATUS

Since launch in February 2005, the Streets to Homes initiative, run by the city's shelter, support and housing division, has helped almost 1,200 people go from the streets into permanent housing where nearly 90 per cent remain. About 3,800 homeless people stay in Toronto shelters on any given night, but the total number using a shelter last year was 24,868 – down 20 per cent from 2001.

In his 2010 blue book, Miller promised to create 1,000 units of affordable housing in the city each year. Last year the city approved 1,797 affordable housing units, but so far this year only 349 have been approved. Nearly 70,000 households in Toronto are on a waiting list.

THE BACK STORY

The city has moved from a model of "enabling" homeless people to remain on the street to an aggressive push to get them housed. This approach has included closing some shelter beds, much to the annoyance of some anti-poverty advocates, who feel the city has moved too quickly.

Officials say this year's failure to reach the 1,000-unit affordable housing target is the result of receiving less housing money from Ottawa and Queen's Park, who pay the lion's share of the cost.

WHAT'S NEXT

Prime Minister Stephen Harper has promised \$1.9 billion to deal with homelessness and affordable housing over the next five years. The city's affordable housing department hopes the benefits will be seen by the end of next year. This spring the city set aside \$5 million a year to hire additional outreach workers to help curb panhandling and find jobs and homes for street people.

SUCCESS OR FAILURE

Moderate success.

ACCOUNTABILITY

THE PLAN

Ensure more accountability, with four independent officers: auditor-general, ombudsperson, integrity commissioner and lobbyist registrar.

ADVOCATES

Mayor David Miller and city council

STATUS

Only the auditor-general's office is running well.

BACK STORY

Despite touting accountability and oversight, hiring staff for these key positions, required by Queen's Park, has been a long, painful process.

The integrity commissioner's job remains unfilled more than two months after David Mullan retired. The city announced it had hired lawyer Geri Sanson in June. But four months later, officials admitted they couldn't negotiate a contract with Sanson. Under dispute: whether she'd be hired as an employee, which the city wanted, or retained for services.

Some cities, such as Hamilton and Vaughan, have given their integrity commissioner authority to issue sanctions – a clear sign of independence – but Toronto has not. Last

year, when Mullan advised a councillor to apologize for irresponsible behaviour during the 2006 election, council voted to ignore his request.

Marilyn Abraham left the job of lobbyist registrar after a year. Linda Gehrke replaced her in August. Lobbyists and politicians complain the new register is complicated, cumbersome and ineffective.

Auditor-general Jeffrey Griffiths has been in the job since 2002, when his position was expanded to ensure more independence. His office is working well.

WHAT'S NEXT

Ombud Fiona Crean starts tomorrow, months behind the city's original target timeframe of June. Her job will be to handle complaints from the public over delivery of city services.

A new search for an integrity commissioner starts soon.

SUCCESS OR FAILURE

Failure.

FEES

THE PLAN

"Everybody Gets to Play," a well-intentioned scheme to give more low-income people free access to recreational programs in Toronto.

ADVOCATES

Mayor David Miller and executive committee member Councillor Joe Mihevc, chair of the community development and recreation committee.

STATUS

The plan didn't even get to city council for approval. Miller and senior staff scrapped it as it was imploding weeks after being introduced.

BACK STORY

Unveiled to much fanfare by the parks, forestry and recreation department, the proposal called for the city to increase its "cost recovery" or "user pay" percentage for recreational programs from 30 per cent to 50 per cent by 2014. A portion of the extra money generated was to go toward the city's Welcome Policy, a subsidy program that gives low-income residents free access to recreation. The proposal also sought to provide free skating, leadership and swimming programs in Toronto public and separate schools for Grade 4 and 5 students. But it became mired in controversy over a proposed 20 per cent increase this year for recreational program fees and permit fees for rink and field rentals.

The hike was later dropped to 8 per cent.

The entire episode was a major embarrassment for the parks and recreation department, and drew charges that Mihevc and the mayor weren't on top of the file.

WHAT'S NEXT

After admitting recently that the city tried to "bite off too much" with the proposal, Mihevc said a revised approach is expected, probably next spring.

SUCCESS OR FAILURE

Complete flop.

NATHAN PHILLIPS

THE PLAN

Repair and rejuvenate Nathan Phillips Square, the city's most important public space.

ADVOCATES

Mayor David Miller, with backing from a broad community coalition. Councillor Peter Milczyn is the political point man overseeing the project.

STATUS

An international design competition attracted wide interest. The winner, Plant Architect, Inc. and Shore Tilbe Irwin, was announced in February 2007.

The designers have been working ever since, translating the sweeping design – including a permanent stage and restaurant, fountains that spring from the deck of the square, and a move for the Peace Garden – into plans that can be handed over to builders.

BACK STORY

The original plan called for a public fundraising campaign to acquire \$25 million of the \$42-million cost.

That idea has been shelved because city officials doubt a campaign would succeed amid fierce competition for philanthropic dollars and a sinking economy. Revenue from the Toronto Parking Authority and advertising on Toronto's new transit shelters has now been earmarked for the project.

WHAT'S NEXT

The first contract is due to go to tender late this month. It involves turning the flat roof over the main entrance, currently closed, into a public garden. Work won't start till the spring, since the whole roof needs repair.

Plans are to proceed in stages, so the entire square doesn't turn into a construction zone at once, with completion in 2012. But lack of private funding might stretch the completion date beyond that.

SUCCESS OR FAILURE

The design winner received broad acclaim, but the test will be awarding the initial contract for the roof garden.

BIKE LANES

THE PLAN

To build 1,000 kilometres of bikeways, including 495 km of bike lanes, by 2012, delayed from the original 2011 target.

ADVOCATES

Councillor Adrian Heaps, who heads the cycling committee, and Mayor David Miller, who promised during his 2006 re-election bid to "construct bike trails and lakefront promenades across the city from Etobicoke to Scarborough."

STATUS

Since 2001, the city has completed 395 km of bike lanes, shared roads and off-road paths. Of those, only 91 km represent bike lanes – of which 7 km were built last year and nearly 20 km this year. That means the city has some serious catching up to do. If council approves an additional 16 km along Lawrence Ave. E. at its December meeting, the city will meet its 50-km target for the year, though they won't all be in place.

BACK STORY

The Bike Plan, first approved in 2001, calls for creating a network of bike-friendly streets that will put all residents within a five-minute ride to the network.

In January, council tried to streamline approvals by taking the decision away from community councils, where politicians could delay and stall under pressure from a single ward councillor opposed to the upheaval caused by adding a bike lane.

But local skirmishes among drivers, cyclists and neighbourhood businesses, each with their own concerns, still slow the process. One example: a prolonged battle over 700 metres of Annette St., opposed by the local councillor. The new process resulted in a city council vote in favour of bike lanes along that stretch.

WHAT'S NEXT

The city has earmarked \$8 million for more bike lanes in its 2009 capital budget, which would add 100 km, and has said it's committed to hitting its 2012 target.

SUCCESS OR FAILURE

Mixed.

UNION STATION

THE PLAN

Turn the historic transportation hub into a hot destination with new stores and restaurants, and new offices in the west wing, while preserving heritage elements.

ADVOCATE

No one.

STATUS

After acquiring the building in 2000, the city sought a private-sector partner to renovate and rehabilitate it, but the initial deal with a consortium fell apart in 2006. The city then decided to go it alone. A private-sector investment of up to \$150 million for a plan to dig down and create a retail hub on the lower level hasn't turned up, so renovations will have to be funded from city resources.

BACK STORY

It's hugely complicated to remake a building that serves as a hub for GO Transit and sees 100,000 commuters stream through daily. GO, the TTC and VIA Rail are just some of the players to be accommodated. Meanwhile, years of neglect have led to a repair backlog of \$190 million.

WHAT'S NEXT

Staff have recommended extending the retainer for architects NORR Limited to continue detailed design-development work. The city wants to take over management from the Toronto Terminals Railway Co. on May 1 and expects the station will operate at a break-even level in 2009.

It's anticipated major repairs and renovations will be done from 2010 through 2012, at a cost of \$365 million.

SUCCESS OR FAILURE

Failure.

TAXES

THE PLAN

Find new revenues to augment property taxes.

ADVOCATE

Mayor David Miller.

STATUS

After an acrimonious fight last fall, city council passed a new municipal land transfer tax on real estate transactions. On the sale of a \$400,000 home, it generates \$3,725.

Council also passed a \$60-a-year personal vehicle registration tax that took effect on Sept. 1 and is expected to provide \$20 million in 2008.

BACK STORY

City tax consultants studied implementing – as part of enhanced powers under the City of Toronto Act – new taxes including road tolls, a parking lot or billboard tax, and sales taxes on tobacco, event tickets and alcohol in bars.

But the politicians balked. They stayed with the land transfer tax, but watered it down under pressure from the real estate industry. People who had already signed purchase agreements didn't have to pay even if their deal closed after Feb. 1, when the tax took effect. The measure had originally been touted to bring in \$300 million a year but will raise only about \$155 million in 2008.

To make the tax more palatable, exemptions were created for first-time buyers, and also for deals already in the pipeline. The tax is expected to eventually yield \$240 million per year.

WHAT'S NEXT

Land transfer tax revenue could grow bigger as house prices and sales climb – but the resale market is slowing. Finance staff says don't count on more than \$240 million.

The city may take another look at new taxes, particularly on booze. A 10 per cent tax on LCBO and bar sales would bring in an estimated \$150 million annually, but it's complicated.

SUCCESS OR FAILURE

Mixed.