



After 5 years, Miller has failed to seal the big deals

November 16, 2008

ROYSON JAMES

David Miller's been Toronto's mayor and chief magistrate for five years. But if he's found his legs as civic leader, it clearly isn't obvious to his subjects.

His first term was widely condemned as a wasted three years, marked by timidity and disappointment. Now, halfway through a newly expanded four-year term, there is the sense that Mayor Miller has the city spinning its wheels.

Miller's problem is not inactivity or laziness; rather, he has trouble closing the deal on major projects. And when that happens repeatedly – the 311-call system, food carts, renovating Union Station and Nathan Phillips Square – voters conclude the leader isn't delivering.

In fact, since Miller was re-elected he has pursued an aggressive agenda, to the point of arrogance.

He attaches his name to city projects, bypassing city council. When he wants to push an item through he claims it as part of his mandate, muting opposition. He has ruminated about bagging more power to his already inflated responsibilities, including the right to hold secret meetings with his hand-picked executive committee.

With such tight control, one would expect quick execution of policies. Miller said last month he was "pleased to report that over 97 per cent" of the items in his mandate "are now underway, and over 28 per cent have already been completed."

So, where is the evidence the city is purring along superbly? Where's the long list of achievements? Upon reflection, the successes appear as partial and small, while citizens seek completion of long-standing, significant projects.

Miller is off hither and yon on many initiatives. But he has completed, by his own accounting, barely a quarter of them. And the ones still outstanding are the issues that matter, the true test of an efficient, effective city administration.

How much longer before he fixes Union Station? In 1998, the year of amalgamation,

Mayor Mel Lastman took a tour of the TTC platforms, too narrow for safety, and vowed they would be widened. They remain untouched. Still, Miller's ambition is to fix the entire complex, using taxpayers' money. We'll update you in 10 years.

Remember how the private sector was to contribute more than half the Nathan Phillips Square makeover cost? No deal.

Taste buds across the city tingled at the prospect of ethnically diverse food sold from street vendors – until the great ideas sank in bureaucratic silliness, such as the ill-fated plan to have the city borrow money to get into the food cart business.

The idea of calling 311 to connect to any city service is a hopeful one for citizens tired of searching for basic information. Five years later, it's still not in place.

When one of the mayor's strongest and universally embraced promises – the establishment of four officers to ensure public accountability – still languishes, more than eyebrows are raised.

Yes, we have more planners at city hall, more cops on the street, fewer potholes, more investments in the arts, a climate change plan, the start of a city-wide transit plan (that's short of funding), and more initiatives than citizens can process. But these have such limited impact on the city's psyche.

Since Miller has been mayor, we've had stunning additions to the Art Gallery of Ontario and the Royal Ontario Museum, plus a new opera house – all in the city, but not built by the city.

It's those types of transformative projects and bold changes Miller has failed to execute or capture.