

CITY IN A PARK

WHAT IF WE STARTED LOOKING AT THE IDEA THAT NEIGHBOURHOODS COULD BE RUN FROM PARKS?

By MIKE SMITH

I wonder what starts people down the paths of their fascinations – city planners, for instance. Children's blocks? A romantic encounter in an urban square?

My first exposure to planning came unexpectedly. Maybe I was protesting too soon after September 11. And maybe I was mouthier six years ago. A constable was searching my knapsack. But soon he and I were agreeing that policing couldn't make us safe.

Unless you design neighbourhoods so people can care for each other, he said, the police will be forever doing mop-up. His superior silently poured the juice from my lunch onto the street to illustrate the point.

I never expected to write about that in the context of municipal budgets. But as Toronto becomes more cash-strapped, less planned and more heavily policed, one wonders about connections.

The Budget Committee will seek deputations in January, and the confusion of worthy causes is matched by the lack of budgetary flexibility - at least when it comes to current ways of doing things.

Two key facts: most money goes for staff, and councillors feel bound by the fact that most of it ends up in two services that are hard to trim: police and the TTC. What to do? The solution may not be cutting or spending, but restructuring.

Staffing was controversial during the recent tax debate and will be during budgeting. Counting on a populist distrust of bureaucracy, council's right wing tends to go after wages or staffing levels. Such crusades tend to find public support.

Surprise! It's not that simple. Savings can become losses. According to some planners, that point is now. Overtaxed people and piles of planning backlog grow costly as work becomes catch-up and applications become Ontario Municipal Board circuses.

But the problem may be bigger. Kyle Rae has a drawerful of descriptors for the situation: he characterizes it as a "crisis in program delivery," behind which "a philosophical struggle over a culture of no" is taking place.

Some of his colleagues, he says, "consider themselves a level of government that needs a significant policy framework to be able to operate.

"As far as I'm concerned," he tells me, "we are a program-delivery level. We fix potholes, we deliver libraries. [But] we've got people in the towers and the offices who are framework [types], which makes it easier for operational staff to say "no."

Is he saying he agrees with calls to cut staff? "I'm saying staff are in the wrong place. We need to get them back onto the frontlines assisting people."

To hear him tell it, they could better assist councillors as well.

He uses the example of a development application. The staff required for a single project can span multiple departments and competing timelines. Anyone who's heard Rae grill senior staff at council won't be surprised to learn he thinks council spends too much time on staff proposals. "There's a shift occurring where members of council are almost being made redundant, because the bureaucracy is in control."

I don't need to prompt Adam Vaughan to agree; he's quick to quote John Sewell, who once quipped that while council should represent people to the system, it currently represents the system to the people.

Vaughan has always prioritized planning. "It's interesting that the budget's ballooning in policing and transit," he says, "which is social isolation and physical isolation. Those are the two issues that drive those budgets, and planning can deal with them."

How? "We know there are neighbourhoods in the suburbs that are almost impossible to police and drive up police costs. Safety isn't built into those communities," he says.

"It's not rocket science; it's good planning. But since amalgamation, the excellence of downtown planning has been chased out of this place as a culture."

He uses Queen West as an example. Pushing for dense, mixed-use, class-diverse development results in residential and commercial space being used by multiple communities around the clock, so blocks are self-policing and self-sustaining. "Neighbourhoods [that are safer] are much more transit-friendly."

Development also tends to bring parkland, which Vaughan says offers a unique opportunity to make use of community energy instead of paid staff.

"I've got five parks in my ward under reconstruction, and each of them is becoming an engagement with the community not only on how to rebuild a park but also on how to run it."

Vaughan wants to take the cloying slogan "City in a park" seriously, by making parks centres of community control. "This cuts out the layer of bureaucracy that deals with managing these parks and allows the redeployment of those resources."

He uses ongoing experiments at Dufferin Grove as an example, and points out that in Vancouver, caretakers live in cottages in the major parks, turning maintenance into more of a community concern. "What if you started looking at the idea that neighbourhoods are run from parks?"

An interesting future. Rae, though, worries about the present. "Some departments were badly damaged during the Lastman years. Parks and rec was one of them," he says.

"At one point, whenever there was an application from a developer saying, 'I can give you land for a park,' the parks department said, 'No, we can't afford to take it. We don't have the staff to keep it clean. '"

Well, shifting toward more frontline staffing and more community control could improve service delivery. Might it also save money?

"I'm not interested in saving money," says Rae, his buoyant tone wilting. "I've been doing that for 17, 18 years now. And it's not getting any better."



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