

Board of Trade members concerned about city infrastructure issues

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June 15, 2010

Is Rob Ford right?

Outside a Toronto Board of Trade event Monday, June 14, Ford, a rising candidate for Toronto mayor, told reporters wasteful spending at City Hall is the number one issue on city voters' minds.

Ford's plan for improving Toronto's transit system would come later, he said. For now, spending - such as on a fellow councillor's \$12,000 retirement party - "is the people's concern," he declared.

Board of Trade members were at the meeting, however, because they want voters and city politicians to talk about other issues.

They saw a chance to start a "dialogue" on three topics of concern - how to pay for transit infrastructure, improve "social cohesion" in the city and promote investment in Greater Toronto - and will use members' advice in the board's Vote Toronto 2010 platform this fall, CEO Carol Wilding said.

What members learned is there is more willingness to talk about ways to raise transit money including road tolls, which politicians considered unmentionable during the last municipal election campaign.

"That's a sea change all by itself," Andy Manahan, executive director of Residential and Civil Construction Alliance of Ontario said later.

The board last month produced a list of revenue tools that have funded transit expansion in other cities, including tolls, congestion charges and an employer payroll tax.

Use of such measures must be tied to a tangible benefit, such as savings in travel time, Manahan said. Otherwise, people will be against them, "because it's just more taxation."

Torontonians know congested transportation "is harming our businesses. Harming our ability to move around. Harming our lifestyle badly," said Julia Deans, executive director of the Toronto City Summit Alliance.

Many wonder, she said, why we don't talk more about what was done in New York City, London or Singapore to fix the problem.

"They know full well that we haven't got it right here."

But Deans said if people want change, they have to talk about how to pay for it. Many don't want to have that conversation, she said.

And despite talk of people wanting action on their chosen issues, participating board members noticed a lack of urgency surrounding them. Most people aren't seeing a burning need to do things differently, said Ian Smith, acting as facilitator.

John Tory, a former candidate for mayor who is the Alliance's voluntary chairperson, also participated and told reporters he's disappointed there's been no discussion in the mayoral campaign of the economy or of the city's "priority neighbourhoods," which have been targeted by the city and its United Way for years in order to promote social cohesion.

The board believes fiscal responsibility is important, but so are the issues it has chosen. If they are not addressed, the "liveability" Toronto prides itself on is at risk, Wilding said.

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