

Time to spruce up the city, Miller says

Cleaning up parks and trash on the streets a priority, mayor advises councillors

By KATHERINE HARDING; Globe & Mail, 21 Feb 2004

Tired of all the litter, graffiti and tired-looking parks and public spaces, Toronto Mayor David Miller has launched an ambitious plan to give the city a good -- and permanent -- scrubbing.

"We've heard from the people of Toronto that improving the cleanliness, vibrancy and beauty of the city is high on their list of priorities, and that it is time to restore civic pride," Mr. Miller writes in a report outlining his new plan, to be debated next Tuesday by a council committee.

His proposal, which is entitled Clean and Beautiful City Initiative, sets out a two-step program that urges council to make this issue a major priority.

Mr. Miller is first urging the city to find a "focused, co-ordinated and sustainable approach" to start cleaning up the city.

He also supports establishing a special committee to oversee this task and also hear from community groups, residents, the tourism and hospitality sector and others on this issue.

Mr. Miller said there is little new money to clean up Toronto, but he urged council not to cut programs and services -- such as a graffiti-removal program and a request for more litter bins in parks -- that are being debated in the ongoing budget process.

The second step of his plan calls on the city to start setting "beautiful city goals," such as:

Raising the bar on urban design and architecture of private and public developments;

Improving the "attractiveness" of public spaces with landscaping, parks design and public design.

Councillor Jane Pitfield, chair of the city's works committee, said she is happy the mayor is trying to tackle this ongoing problem, which has hurt the city's reputation as a clean place to visit and live.

"What we don't need to do is throw more money after this problem," she said. Ms. Pitfield added that the city already spends about \$16-million a year keeping the streets clean. About 90 per cent of that is spent on picking up what falls on the ground, such as coffee cups, newspapers and fast-food containers.

Ms. Pitfield said the city has long struggled to find solutions to Toronto's growing cleanliness problem and is slowly seeing results. In 2000, then-mayor Mel Lastman unveiled a \$2.3-million campaign to battle litter and overflowing garbage cans. Last year, city officials launched a "clean streets" project developed in co-operation with the Toronto Board of Trade and local businesses whose products are recyclable but often tossed away by users. It also unrolled a media campaign about the subject, put 1,000 more garbage bins on the streets and raised fines for people caught littering.

Councillor Brian Ashton, chair of the city's economic development and parks and recreation committee, likes the mayor's plan, but added that it will be vital to get the public's long-term support.

"It wouldn't happen just coming from the internal bowels of city hall," he said. "It's going to have to be a community-driven desire. People are going to have to want to be proud of their city again.

"Enthusiasm for these type of programs comes and goes. This has to get rooted for the long-term," he said.

In terms of the budget, Mr. Ashton added that it's going to be a struggle to keep money aimed at beautifying the parks and keeping the streets clean from being axed. Council is trying to eliminate a \$344-million budget shortfall.

Mr. Ashton was recently heavily criticized by some councillors, including the budget chief, for not trimming the city's parks and recreation budget enough and even for rejecting a cost-cutting plan to reduce the number of flower beds and plantings in Toronto's parks.

"I was condemned for saving flower beds, yet the mayor is saying, 'Let's make the parks more beautiful'. Which is it?" he said.

"It's sort of like going into the bank and not knowing which teller to speak to."

During last fall's mayoral race, Mr. Miller campaigned on a promise to increase the number of litter pickers and place more garbage bins in front of convenience stores and fast-food outlets.