

Brian Graff

Toronto Mayoral Candidate

The following answers were provided by the candidate in response to [a letter sent by the Toronto Society of Architects on May 16, 2023](#) outlining four questions related to issues of the built environment. Answers have been copied and pasted into this page for clarity and ease of access, but all answers are verbatim and no changes or edits have been made.

Q1: Housing is a fundamental human right, and yet an increasing number of residents across the Greater Toronto Area are struggling to pay rent or find an affordable place to live. What policies and actions do you believe need to be implemented to address this crisis?

A: Let me start by saying I am probably the only candidate of 102 that actually has a degree in Architecture, so I appreciate this chance to talk to you. I left the profession in 1993 and did an MBA, before getting my license. I graduated from Waterloo a few years prior to that when the program was not a part of Engineering, but Environmental Studies. I was exposed to the book Limits to Growth, which still influences my thoughts on growth and the environment.

I also became involved in politics when I was a student and have been sceptical of immigration policy since 1993 when there were few jobs in architecture, and we were in a recession yet 3 major parties were vowing to increase immigration. Immigration policy is highly politicized and not necessarily based on what is good for average Canadians. We have had high immigration policy since Mulroney changed it in 1990 to constant high immigration, and Trudeau is now doubling immigration.

You can go to my Star op-ed at <https://www.thestar.com/opinion/contributors/2023/05/10/the-real-cause-of-torontos-traffic-congestion-and-housing-crisis.html> for a shorter version of the rest of this answer.

Nobody else running for Mayor is talking about how the main cause of Toronto's problems with housing affordability, congestion, inadequate public transit, inadequate parks and some other issues is the insanely high population growth of the GTA, driven by federal immigration which is doubling an already high level of immigration of 250,000 in 2015 to 500,000 in 2015. In fact, we let in 1.05 million people last year when TFWs and foreign students are included.

See the graph at <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/business/article-canadas-next-wave-of-homebuyers-set-to-add-more-fuel-to-overheated/> for the relationship between housing inflation and population growth.

Then look up the "Century Initiative" plan for 100 million population in 2100 at

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Century_Initiative though global population will peak around 2070. This group is

backed by the banks and corporate Canada on the belief that bigger is better when it comes to GDP – instead of raising GDP per capita (which is a flawed proxy for standard of living, which is what matters)

The plan calls for the GTA to grow from 8.8 million in 2011 to 33.5 million in 2100. All of Canada was 33 million in 2005.

About 218,000 immigrants came into the Toronto area last year, on top of 21,000 natural growth - so we are growing by 240,000 people a year, save for 96,000 net moving out to other places. That means we really need 100,000 to 120,000 homes just to come into balance with demand, which would stabilize prices.

Look at planning department numbers at <https://www.toronto.ca/city-government/data-research-maps/research-reports/planning-development/development-pipeline/> page 13. We are building about 35-40,000 homes a year – Toronto has gone from under 25% of the GTA in the 1990s to 45%-50% today.

There is no shortage of land for housing – at least for condos which are now the only thing built in the 416. We have about 200,000 units rezoned in the last 5 years, and about 400,000 units in the application stage – see table 2 on Page 8 of the report.

We have “record numbers of cranes” – there is no slack capacity and immigration brings in educated white collar professionals, and increase demand for labour and not just supply. We increase immigration but labour shortages do not go away.

Ideas like Missing Middle and ending exclusionary zoning will not have a huge impact and there is only so much construction capacity (skilled trades, contractors, etc.) in the GTA – we cannot just double the number of units in an economy already too dependent economically on the housing and construction sectors.

Edward Keenan’s in the Star has interview with David Miller who refers to the “big stick” of the mayor in uniting the city to get the upper governments to change or act – I believe that this is the best role for the Mayor who is 1 vote of 26 and the strong mayor powers are mostly both undemocratic and insufficient at the same time.

The new Mayor has to get the upper governments to reduce growth as top priority, and get other 905 leaders to support it.

I support the idea land trusts and the city MURA program which buys up existing apartment buildings. The City only has so much land to sell or lease out through programs like HousingNow (which has excessively long 99-year lease terms when anything after 30 years have little value using discounted cash flow valuations, and the city can borrow for less than private sector firms).

For units to be “affordable”, the money has to come from somewhere – often federal funds in past for RGI apartments. The city either gives up development charges, Section 37 money or other benefits, otherwise the cost of a few affordable units has to be tacked on to the sale price of any “market” units.

There is no free lunch.

Population growth not only pushes up current supply and demand, but the greenbelt makes it worse by limiting the long term supply of land, and I do support the Green Belt, but development is leapfrogging over it.

I have studied land economics on top of my MBA. When there is high population growth and a city grows, the price of land increases. If someone expects growth to continue in future, there is speculative/arbitrage profits to be made of the price increasing faster than inflation. This is why land removed from the Green Belt by Ford immediately went up in value though it might not be developed for 20 years, and why other land in the Green Belt is being held in reserve knowing it will increase faster than most alternative investments.

The candidates for mayor who are claiming that their programs will have any real impact are not being honest – it is too little even if they can find the money, and the problem is not a lack of land rezoned for housing.

Q2: The design, construction and operation of our built environment accounts for nearly 40% of energy related carbon emissions, contributing to the ongoing climate crisis affecting us today. What do you believe needs to be prioritised to reduce carbon emissions within the built environment?

A: The city is broke and has limited funds and powers, and global warming is a typical “tragedy of the commons” where reducing GHGs produces almost no local benefits but the entire planet suffers from cumulative inaction. This is largely a problem that has to be solved top-down by our federal government working with foreign government and provincial governments.

Even speeding up electrification of heating and hot water requires the province/hydro not use natural gas for any electricity generation. Canada has 4 provinces with excess hydro power – BC MB QC and NL yet these 4 provinces export clean hydro power to the US while most other provinces refuse to switch to an east-west power grid that keeps this power here and means we can avoid more expensive and potentially less green alternatives. Ford would rather build more nuclear plants than work with Quebec – nuclear should be a “last resort” option given the issues of both waste storage and previous cost overruns in building and maintaining the plants.

If Toronto adopts much tougher green standards than the 905, this could just backfire by driving jobs out of the city or making housing more expensive. There need to be uniform provincial level rules across the GTA.

Cities were initially incorporated to provide local services – not much different than condominium corporations act to provide pooled services and maintain common areas, but not to redistribute income or alter the behaviour or choices of owners and what they do in their units – save where it has a direct impact on others such as noises. Toronto is a “creature of the province’ and really I believe that the federal and provincial governments have to foot

the bill on global warming – giving tools like toll roads or sales taxes are impractical given the ease that people and businesses can move across an invisible line to the next municipality.

Edward Keenan’s article and interview with David Miller refers to the “big stick” of the mayor in uniting the city to get the upper governments to change or act – I believe that this is the best role for the Mayor who is 1 vote of 26 and the strong mayor powers are mostly both undemocratic and insufficient at the same time.

Q3: In towns and cities, so much of life happens in the shared public spaces—in our parks, libraries and streets. How can we ensure these civic spaces achieve design excellence in their initial conception and construction, and that they are properly maintained so they may continue to serve future generations?

A: Toronto’s main problem is that unlike Chicago’s waterfront or other cities (Montreal, San Francisco, Montreal, Vancouver, or even Buffalo) we lack a large Central Park like New York or network of parks like the Royal Parks in London. Toronto is supposed to get 1.4 million more people by 2050 yet we have inadequate parks for today’s needs, wet alone for 2050 of the insane idea of the GTA having 33.5 million in 2100. We have sold off most of the Waterfront and issues like the Gardiner Rebuild often include references to “freeing up more land for housing” and no mention of parks.

I would stop the selloff of Waterfront land for condos. I worked on the failed 1996 Olympic Bid – we once had a vision of public spaces around the core that would have resulted – the best we had lately was the too-late idea of a billion dollar rail deck park even though we have other lands we are likely to sell off for far less than this amount. Unfortunately, I have had a lot of dispiriting interactions with the city’s Planning Department and their planners lack any real sense of urban design – cars were the planning god and ultimate public good in the 1960s, now densification at any cost is the new god and public good they don’t question. We get wedding cake buildings because developers can fill up a “Jell-O mold” shape left over from angular planes – so developers cram every square foot of density they can into the allowed maximum massing and there is no room for architects to vary from this massing.

We get fads like “complete streets” but no requirement to maintain open space on private land and to design it better – we lose such existing spaces in the name of more density.

We need to use all the tools at hand, but mainly to work with other municipal governments to get the province to give us more tools or limit the power of developers to ignore good planning or democratic processes.

Q4: Toronto’s modern architectural heritage is at risk, with both the redevelopment of Ontario Place and the potential demolition of the Ontario Science Centre jeopardizing some of the most important architectural landmarks in the country. Other modern buildings, including city-owned properties, have been left to decay with inadequate maintenance. What measures will you take as Mayor to protect, preserve and revitalize our city’s 20th century built legacy?

A: I fell in love with Modern Architecture as a kid in Don Mills, which had some incredible mid-century architecture though so much of it has been lost or permanently mutilated – and this is continuing. I also have a love for Art Deco and other periods including recent gems. Ontario Place and the Science Centre were major influences on me – I visited the OSC many weekends in winter and Ontario Place in Summer, and I am shocked at the total disregard for these great buildings that should be protected and cherished and actually improved.

The greatest threats to heritage are neglect (just go to Cuba) or population growth and redevelopment pressures that result from growth (Toronto – since the beginning, just read Eric Arthur etc.). Toronto is the only City I know that would be happy to have condos plonked into the middle of a World Heritage Site (Distillery District).

I became involved in urban planning in The Beach when I loved there in 2009 – including fights at the OMB to protect Queen Street and the views of the Fire Hall which is still only “listed” and not “designated”. The City cut back on Heritage after 1997 and it has not been a priority to use the tools we have under law and the Official Plan – but Ford’s recent moves mean even greater risk than the usual obstacles of weak provincial laws and an unsympathetic OMB/LPAT/OLT.

I think the city needs to properly fund Heritage Services but the key is to fight the province on heritage and other laws that see us so unable to little but protect a few facades that get tacked onto a new tower, but also to tackle the provincial and federal governments over growth/immigration and other policies.