Revisiting the Toronto Strong Neighbourhoods Strategy 2020

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About the Publication:

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As a second-year candidate in the joint JD/MBA program and Scarborough resident, Bryan is passionate about understanding broader changes within the city. Along with his siblings, as the firsts in his family to receive a post-secondary education, he is interested in studying the role that neighbourhoods and institutions have in facilitating socio-economic mobility or perpetuating inequalities. Bryan has previously worked in community development, financial services, and public policy. A common thread in all of his work is a specific emphasis on understanding the interactions between governments and people and the impacts of public policy on broader society.

As an introduction about the author and a bit about why this program at the School of Cities and the topic of urban policy
were interesting, Bryan previously pursued worked in policy, government affairs and the law. He is the son of working-class immigrants living in Scarborough North.
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Why Toronto Strong Neighbourhoods Strategy 2020 and Community-Based Policy?

Like many others in Scarborough, the author is a beneficiary of two industries that have developed out of very deliberate policy choices that reshape the city and its communities: finance (think Bay St and the infrastructure built around supporting the financial services industry) and post-secondary education (think of all three UofT campuses, but especially downtown or that of York University in North York and Vaughan and Markham in York Region). These industries and institutions have provided the region with tremendous economic opportunity and the GTHA expects to grow much more from it.
Yet, throughout the pandemic, neighbourhoods like Scarborough, and other suburbs, reportedly face a clear problem: high COVID-19 case counts, policy analysis that finds these neighbourhoods to be economically poorer and disconnected from the broader Toronto region’s social programs and institutions.
So we have an issue born out of two observations: one, that there are these policies that made the city so attractive for human and financial capital and that is making Toronto a world-class city, but another finding that so many people are still hurting and this is concentrated.

COVID only exacerbated and revealed new schisms from a long-standing problem affecting how the City of Toronto supports Neighbourhood Improvement Areas, and it’s clearly not just within the boundaries of the City of Toronto. So, the project wanted to understand what cities in the GTHA can do to confront this challenge.

The policy brief explores policies and lessons to learn for municipal governments around the GTHA to implement as part of the community-based policymaking and to rebuild and reimagine GTHA policymaking processes.
What pressures have social programing and economic development in Toronto faced during this pandemic to meet the needs of local communities, its many different residents, and their concerns, especially around demand for affordable housing, enhanced employment standards, and civic participation? As neighbourhoods change as a result of the
pandemic and post-pandemic recovery, does the City of Toronto’s existing plan to promote healthy communities and to create opportunity for employment, civic participation, social integration? Does the current Toronto Strong Neighbourhoods Strategy, 2020 enable residents of targeted Neighbourhood Improvement Areas to access social mobility, build healthy communities and reduce poverty?

A key challenge will be designing economic and social development policies that provide adequate protection and supports to traditionally marginalized communities.

The research primarily focused on asking stakeholders about their experience with the Toronto Strong Neighbourhoods Strategy and community-specific policymaking efforts in Toronto. The policy brief will explore the legacy of the Toronto Strong Neighbourhoods Strategy as the city re-evaluates its policies after COVID and lessons that municipal policymakers
across the GTHA can take to develop its own community-oriented policies.

**Background: What is Toronto Strong Neighbourhoods Strategy 2020?**

As a primer about Toronto Strong Neighbourhoods Strategy 2020, in 2005, the first iteration of Toronto Strong Neighbourhoods Program was launched by the City of Toronto in partnership with United Way Toronto following years of academic research into community-based policymaking. A previously academic endeavour had become adopted by civil society organizations and municipal government. The purpose of this program was to address inequality in Neighbourhood Improvement Areas (among the City of Toronto’s 140 social planning communities, communities with this designation are deemed by policymakers to be prioritized for investment). These communities were found to lag other communities within the city based on different criteria. In 2010, the World Health Organization developed five domains as part of its Urban HEART
(“Urban Health Equity Assessment and Response Tool”) framework to help city leaders and their communities resolve health and social inequities. This framework was later adopted by the City of Toronto to guide how community wellbeing was measured. There was an explicit goal to address inequality in “Neighbourhood Improvement Areas” (to be prioritized among Toronto’s 140 social planning neighbourhoods). In 2014, the Toronto Strong Neighbourhoods Policy was updated for 2020 and focused on five domains:

Healthy Lives  Economic Opportunity
Social Development  Physical Surroundings
Participation in Civic Decision-Making

Figure 3 Five Domains that Guide the Toronto Strong Neighbourhoods Strategy, Based on the WHO's Urban HEART Framework

The five domains are supposed to encompass every part of community life, from individuals’ mental & physical health; access to economic opportunity through skills training & jobs; access to social development; livable physical surroundings; and civic participation.
Reflections on Toronto Strong Neighbourhoods Strategy 2020

As part of this report, the author interviewed members of four key stakeholder groups: policymakers (including former and current elected officials, policy experts, and government staff), representatives from community advocate groups, businesses (owners of small and medium enterprise, real estate developers, and public relations managers for large companies), and civilians (the report tried to interview a wide variety of civilians (representative of different views: race, gender, age, income, home ownership, level of civic engagement, commuting, type of profession, and more). To develop a panel of interviewees who are representative of the community and different perspectives). As part of it, the Interviews, journey maps, and conversations. The focus of our interviews were based on the policymaking process and these stakeholder’s attempts to either participate in the policymaking process, about their own research and assessment about the community-oriented policies that stem from the Toronto Strong Neighbourhoods Strategy,
and their assessment of the process and how the strategy changed their communities over time.

The report also used journey maps that were helpful in conversations with Community Advocates, Businesses, and Civilians since the research focused on the policymaking process and whether they think gov’t worked to change their communities. The journey maps drew out specific reflections on the policymaking process and their actions to seek change. It was all very valuable but especially for the civic participation domain. Given more time, interviewing more representatives from each stakeholder group would be helpful.
Figure 4: Sample of Journey Map used for Interviews

Results of Toronto Strong Neighbourhoods Strategy 2020

The Toronto Strong Neighbourhoods Strategy was too broad and encompassed many matters to provide a measure for specific project outcomes (there were dozens of projects for each community planning table). However, in discussions with stakeholders, there are some generalized observations about the impact of the Strategy through specific community projects and about the influence that the Strategy has on municipal policymaking across the GTHA.
Community-Specific Projects:
There were generally mixed results for community-specific policy objectives and projects. While many projects had been completed, there was a sizeable amount that is still in progress or incomplete. Some of this is partially because of the nature of the project or because it was impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. However, numerous projects and objectives were not met because they faced obstacles that delayed their timelines. These delays occurred between 2015, when the latest iteration of the Toronto Strong Neighbourhood Strategy started and the end of 2019. However, some elected officials noted that the strategy is not expected to be completed, but to serve as an aspirational document for policymakers and to encourage government to continue its work for specific communities.

For some completed projects, stakeholders (especially community advocate groups and some elected officials) noted that they had produced “lower-quality” outcomes for some communities. Examples from the South East Scarborough
Planning Table include: Community Food Handling Skills, Childcare Provider Information Sessions, and a Canada Goose Recruitment Drive that put community residents into “low-skill” and “blue-collar” labour in hotspot regions. However, this was just the nature of work requiring an on-site and indoors presence. For social programming, one policy choice may take away resources from others when officials sought to pass a bill through City Council.

Some neighbourhoods were unable to access aid since they were not considered Neighbourhood Improvement Areas. For example, North St. James Town was unable to access aid by nature of how maps and boundaries are drawn to include high-priced homes. This raised the average income that made residents unable to receive additional funding and aid.

Finally, policymakers could not reasonably foresee every possible factor and priority to be considered and developed for community improvement. COVID-19 created an extreme “stress
test” that the City of Toronto was not expecting. As such, the five domains lacked key performance indicators that would have been effective in countering the COVID-19 pandemic, like per-capita access to pharmacies in a region. In hindsight, most policymakers were dealing with a trade-off between comprehensiveness and prioritizing projects and objectives that make the most impact.

Policy & Organizational Cultural Impact

The true value of the Toronto Strong Neighbourhoods Strategy is from spurring the City of Toronto to adopt a community-based perspective to policymaking that spreads within municipal government, but also to others in the GTHA as policymakers move to new roles or share lessons about this tool. In effect, government was encouraged to measure and be very clear about policies and objectives, like SMART goals for policy. The process also eroded silos to spur more interdisciplinary policymaking. The City of Toronto serves as an influential force changing how the broader GTHA thinks about policy. The Toronto Strong
Neighbourhoods Strategy has much value as a framework or organizing philosophy for the City of Toronto and elsewhere.

**Perspectives from Stakeholders:**

General findings from interview included the findings that:

- Community advocacy groups think that Toronto Strong Neighbourhood Strategy 2020 is a marked improvement from past policies, but there is still a long way to go to bringing community perspectives into policymaking.

- Policymakers think that there are clear flaws that were highlighted in COVID. They also see some goals conflicting as the GTHA changes and the City faces a constraint on land (for example, how to facilitate the protection of green space for local residents while pursuing development).

- Businesses appreciated that government has had to be clearer about what policy and projects will be pursued in key neighbourhoods where they operate.
- Civilians still feel locked out of the civic and decision making process. One concern is that government strategies are too hard to disentangle. There is a valid concern about whether this complexity helps with bringing inclusion of residents.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Community Groups</th>
<th>Policymakers</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TSNS brought representation to local communities and empowered community advocates</td>
<td>COVID highlighted flaw in TSNS’s space &amp; scoring. Areas too large for perfectly equitable policy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The City of Toronto did not follow through with some of its community-oriented goals</td>
<td>Hard to fight natural economic and social forces that change communities, but policy can mitigate problems and capitalize on new opportunities</td>
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<td>The City of Toronto’s multiple strategies overlaps and obfuscates community decisions</td>
<td>Some goals conflict and this will continue to occur as the city runs into a key constraint: lack of space</td>
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<td>Ontario’s decision (to reform city hall) hurt community-based planning</td>
<td>Reforming city council hurt, but forced recognition of interdependence between communities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TSNS empowered community groups to be active in the decision-making process</td>
<td>Fewer councillors empowered incumbents and allowed for creative problem solving</td>
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<td>Forced the City of Toronto to think through and outline plans, making them more accountable</td>
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Other municipalities see similar issues as development focuses on key regions within their cities (ex. Mississauga Downtown and Square One in Peel)

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Businesses</th>
<th>Civilians</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TSNS forced the City of Toronto to be clear about tangible goals for each community</td>
<td>Economic opportunities, investment, and social development are still unequally distributed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TSNS spurred gov’t to think about how it could support businesses through non-financial barriers (ex. training, transport, infrastructure, etc.,)</td>
<td>“This strategy sounds great, but I never heard of it until you mentioned it.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TSNS summarized all the important objectives across government, but overarching policy sometimes remained unclear for applicants</td>
<td>“There are too many strategies at the City of Toronto, how can people attribute one outcome to a specific strategy as opposed to another?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COVID proved that municipal governments still face challenges in the policymaking process</td>
<td>“Problems of community outreach and participation are in application stage, not policy.”</td>
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Conclusion: Community Policymaking – Lessons for GTHA

The GTHA is a fantastic destination for investment and business and it means that the region will see similar growth and city challenges as the City of Toronto in the future.

This report looks at population projections because migration is described as a great proxy for economic growth: people come to Ontario for a sense of long-term economic opportunity and their presence fuels economic growth, creating a virtuous cycle. Another reason is that increases in population requires more housing development and infrastructure. In turn, this spurs communities to become denser and to change. As such, regions will change from rural to suburban to urban, and more communities will become more diverse and likely face similar changes and instances of inequality between people.

Based on this metric, community-based strategies will matter across the GTHA. Ontario’s future population growth is mostly concentrated in the GTHA. Based on the 2021 Ontario budget, the province’s population is expected to grow by 35.8% (almost 5.3 million people) over the next 26 years. The estimated population for July 1, 2020 was 14.7 million people. By 2046, the population for July 1, 2046 is estimated to be 20.0 million people.
Figure 5 Ontario's Projected Population (Through to 2046)

Drilling down into specific regions, the GTA and Central Ontario is clearly leading future growth. Consequently, more rural areas will give way to development and become suburbs and some regions will urbanize.
Figure 6 Ontario's Projected Population Growth (by Region)

Figure 7 Ontario's Projected Population Growth (by Region)
In discussions with stakeholders, four lessons could be drawn from this project and from reflecting on the Toronto Strong Neighbourhood Strategy.

Lesson 1: Plan for community dynamism and future population changes

![Figure 8 An Image of Amazon's YYY9 (Fulfillment Centre)](image)

All policymakers face the same issues of inequality, but its community trends will only accelerate as COVID-19 ends in 2022 and recovery starts. Drafting plans to manage these problems is key. While the exact shape of community change is hard to tell, municipalities must manage impending changes to rural, exurb,
suburban, and urban regions. The GTHA must prepare for this expected dynamism. Communities will also face inequality as new people move out of Toronto or new forms of economic activity emerge (for example, in ecommerce fulfillment centres like Amazon YYZ9 in Scarborough North). These are all new things that change existing neighbourhoods and maybe put policy in flux.

2) **Use transit to help residents and communities tap into economic clusters, secular trends, and social programming**

Some regions will not easily become a new technology or financial hub. However, residents from across the GTHA can provide skilled labour to meet new industry demands. As such, it is important to ensure that all communities have access to some form of accessible transit – whether it be public transit or road and highway infrastructure to connect people.

Transit helps facilitate all growth in the GTHA. It allows people to go to work in downtown Toronto, the offices, and factories along the 401 and around Pearson Airport, and in other regions. While many GTHA suburbs rely on a provincial agency, Metrolinx, for travel across the region to other hubs, municipalities must be astute about ways to ensure that residents can access buses and other connections to these major systems. For example, one clear issue in the pandemic has been sparse availability of buses
for communities to reach work in north-west Toronto, causing cramming and a lack of social distancing. In a better example of community-based policy done right, the new 939B route now provides commuters with a simple alternative to multiple connections by bus for people from Scarborough to access Finch West station in North York and to get to York University and industrial sites and factories in North York. There is a similar bus service now on the 939C route that allows residents from east Scarborough communities like Malvern to easily reach major hubs like the subway at Finch Station. These solutions are faster and easier to implement than trying to build another cluster or design social programming within communities to meet residents’ needs and allows them the opportunity to participate in industries and programming with economies of scale.

3) Cities must review boundaries as communities change so that it can microtargeting policy to reach people in need

As cities encourage more mixed-income and multi-purpose communities, there runs an added risk that it skews how communities are perceived by policymakers and risks sideling communities from accessing much needed policy interventions. In one example of this, North St James Town is not a designated Neighbourhood Improvement Area but has a poverty rate and proportion of visible minorities and renters that is significantly higher than the median Toronto community. However, the boundaries of the neighbourhood also includes a number of
homes with residents who are likely high income earners along Jarvis and Bloor (image below).

Figure 9 The Boundaries of North St. James Town, 2016 Census Statistics, and a Recent Listing (Dated 2021-06-25)
4) The 2018 Municipal Reforms, COVID-19, and the 2020 deadline are opportunities to revisit how to manage community-based policy and build a better future.

The 2018 municipal reforms implemented by the Ontario government, the COVID-19 pandemic, and fact that the Toronto Strong Neighbourhoods Strategy was supposed to be reviewed in 2020 all present opportunities to the City of Toronto’s ability to craft policy for specific communities. While there are key risks to civic participation, from the removal of councillors, the shifting of policy to a city-wide pandemic response, and the risk that time and other factors have eroded the ability for community stakeholders to reach out to the city (and vice versa), this presents a chance to revise community-based policymaking.

In discussions with stakeholders, and government officials, one common finding was that the impending review of the Toronto Strong Neighbourhoods Strategy presents an opportunity to rethink community boundaries for policy analysis, and that it gave incumbent officials more resources and leeway to develop policy solutions for a broader region. This, in theory, should give government officials proportionally more power to enact changes and for stakeholders to work in a coalition.
Going Forward

2020 is an opportunity to revisit community policy and to rethink boundaries for a better city. Most importantly, this project provides a template for other municipalities to develop their own community-oriented equity strategies.

This policy brief aims to address the inequities of different communities throughout the GTHA. More research and consultations are required so as to develop a more accommodative, representative, and effective strategy to build municipalities that work for everyone.
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