
It's time to build 'the Toronto of Tomorrow'; [Ontario Edition]

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Flex political muscle, trade chair says

Toronto desperately craves strong political leadership to make this city vibrant and healthy and, with elections looming, there is no better time to ensure that happens, says the chair of the Toronto Board of Trade.

With a municipal vote in November, a provincial election expected this spring and a federal Liberal leadership contest, Dale Richmond believes it's the perfect opportunity to lobby Ottawa and Queen's Park for Toronto's needs, especially government investment in areas such as transit, housing and revitalizing the waterfront.

"The time to champion our city is now," Richmond told the board of trade's annual dinner last night attended by the city's business elite. "It is our turn. It is your turn to help build the 'Toronto of Tomorrow.' Together, we must be champions as business leaders, elected officials and public-minded citizens."

Among the 1,800 guests at the Westin Harbour Castle hotel were business leaders like Peter Godsoe of Scotiabank and Stephen Letwin of Enbridge.

Rogers Cable executive John Tory and entertainment guru David Mirvish were also in attendance. Frank Stronach, chair of Magna International, was the keynote speaker.

Politicians in attendance included Deputy Premier Elizabeth Witmer, federal Transport Minister David Collenette and former premier Mike Harris.

Richmond attacked the federal and provincial governments for failing "to provide proper stewardship of this major economic engine."

He maintained their investment in Toronto, "the country's greatest wealth-generating asset," is insufficient.

Although much public attention has been paid to spending more money on health and education, Richmond argues investing in cities is "a critical component" of any action plan on health and education.

Richmond added the city must be allowed to become more self-reliant by getting access to new revenue sources such as a portion of existing gas taxes that the federal and provincial governments collect. That revenue could be put toward the city's transportation infrastructure costs.

"The board will hold political feet to the fire as we move into this election season," vowed Richmond, who is also president and CEO of OMERS, the pension plan for Ontario municipal employees.

"I encourage you to support those candidates who are committed to this agenda for city-building."

Mayor Mel Lastman, even though he's not running for re-election, vowed to keep the pressure up on governments to give Toronto greater funding and autonomy.

"We've got to make them understand if they don't invest in us, it will hurt business, which will ultimately hurt them."

In his speech, Richmond touted several recent achievements on the cultural front including a new design and expansion of the Royal Ontario Museum, improvements at Roy Thomson Hall and a revitalized Toronto Symphony Orchestra, and plans for a new opera house.

"World-class cultural institutions attract visitors. They grow our creative class and boost jobs," he said.

Other successes of the past year include the creation of the MaRS Discovery District, a new centre on University Ave. that focuses on commercializing biomedical research, and the Toronto Waterfront Revitalization Corp., he said.

Richmond wants to see action on the waterfront redevelopment plans.

"Our city council must understand and embrace the opportunity that is before them. A bold waterfront vision can define Toronto's and Canada's relevance on the global stage," he said. "Now is the time to rise above the pettiness that engulfs them on this issue."

He conceded progress has been made, but it's time for every level of government to commit the necessary resources and "stop the political games that threaten to derail waterfront renewal."

"Our waterfront should be the envy of others. Let's stop the delays. Let's get rolling."

Although Toronto residents told planners in public meetings they wanted to see parks and green space on a revitalized waterfront, last week city councillors agreed with architects that housing should be allowed along the water's edge, south of Queens Quay.

Also at the top of the agenda for Toronto's future are multi-year capital funding for the Toronto Transit Commission and funding for affordable housing that includes access to government-owned lands and tax incentives for the private sector, Richmond said.

Premier Ernie Eves announced last week that Queen's Park was giving the TTC \$62 million for capital funding, but it was \$42 million short of the transit commission's request.

[Illustration]

Caption: Rick Madonik/toronto star Toronto Board of Trade chair Dale Richmond, left, with Magna chief Frank Stronach, said elections this year will be crucial for stronger government funding for the city. Besides the municipal election, a provincial race and a federal Liberal leadership contest are due.

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