

## **Leadership in Times of Disaster**

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*At the Economic Developers Council of Ontario 2021 annual conference “EvolveOn”, Carolina Miceli, Amanda Nugara and Luda Zadorovich, students in the post-graduate Public Administration Program at Seneca College, summarized the workshop entitled “Bright Ideas Competition”.*

*The speakers included Mayors Jeff Lehman of Barrie, Diane Therrien of Peterborough and David Bailey of Brant County discussing how current leaders are handling and providing public assistance throughout the pandemic.*

### **Abstract**

The Economic Developers Council of Ontario hosted a panel of Mayors from across the province to provide leadership insight in times of disaster within the scope of municipal government. Mayors Jeff Lehman of Barrie, Diane Therrien of Peterborough and David Bailey of Brant County were brought together to discuss their unique experiences and provide input from a local governance perspective while adhering to public health guidelines. The Mayoral conversations were separated into three areas: (1) making substantial decisions with little or incomplete information, (2) not having a playbook for preparedness, and (3) adapting to a Toronto diaspora. Each topic provided an in-depth analysis based on the comments made by each Mayor.

**Keywords:** *K-shaped recession, Economic Support Task Force, Toronto Diaspora, EDCO, the Medical Officer of Health (MOH), COVID-19, Emergency Response Plan (ERP), Emergency Control Group (ECG), Business Improvement Area (BIA), Eastern Ontario Mayors’ Caucus (EOMC), B2B, K-Shaped Recovery, Toronto Regional Real Estate Board (TRREB)*

### **Introduction**

The theme, “Leadership in Times of Disaster”, was discussed by a panel of three Ontario Mayors who gave their points of view regarding the pandemic and how it has affected the municipalities they represent. The panel consisted of Mayor Jeff Lehman from the City of Barrie, who has held the position of Mayor since 2010, winning 91% of the popular vote in the most recent election in 2018 (Barrie, 2021). He is “a passionate believer in transforming urban economies through public and private leadership” (Barrie). Joining Mayor Lehman was Mayor Diane Therrien of the City of Peterborough, who had started her municipal journey in 2014 as a council member and one of three women to have held the mayoral position Peterborough (Rellinger). The last member of the panel was Mayor David Bailey of Brant County, who is also serving his first mayoral term as of 2018. He supports repurposing historic buildings, and he is also the chair of Brant Municipal Enterprises (Brant). This panel was asked various questions about economic development, diversity, and leading through this pandemic and shed light on how their regions had adapted when their municipalities needed it most.

## **1) Making Substantial Decisions with Incomplete Information**

Making the right decision during a pandemic, without the most up-to-date information, is more complicated than most public officials are willing to admit. Taking precautionary and proactive measures without hindering a local government's economic prosperity is a true balancing act. Mayor Lehman, Therrien and Bailey agreed with the difficulty of displaying a sense of knowledge of what to do when there is little to no margin for error. Mayor Therrien spoke about current emergency by-laws in Peterborough and how they cater to more environmental and physical emergencies rather than a pandemic. Mayor Therrien's recommended a committee be formed to oversee the management, enforcement, and prevention of less easily identified emergencies than a storm or flood.

According to the City of Peterborough's *Emergency Response Plan* dated December of 2018, the Medical Officer of Health is responsible for the activation and direction of the "Pandemic Influenza Contingency Plan." Consequently, the MOH reports to the Emergency Operations Centre Commander, who then reports to the Policy Group or Emergency Control Group and other designated authorities including, but not limited to the Mayor. The ECG is responsible for managing resources, setting priorities and strategic direction, and ensuring that business continuity and essential services are maintained directly to the areas impacted by the emergency. Despite this plan, it begs the question, "how does the City of Peterborough address emergencies that affect all of its residents?". This emergency plan's rhetoric suggests that emergencies are likely to happen in a contained or specific environment, nowhere near the scope of the impact that the COVID-19 virus has had on the world. This proved that public servants were ill-informed to make high pressured decisions and it is especially true that their respective MOH's had to see their recommendations pass through various chains of command when new information was received at a slow rate.

## **2) No Playbook for Preparedness**

Mayor Jeff Lehman opened the panel with an important message; there is no playbook when it comes to being prepared, and there is little visibility about the challenges that lay ahead. Both Mayor Lehman and Mayor Therrien addressed the economic support task forces that have been explicitly established in this situation. Mayor Lehman in Barrie put together a task force that includes retailers, builders, the downtown Business Improvement Area (BIA), and the Chamber of Commerce in an attempt at targeting response to individual sectors. An essential piece of this reimagined playbook is recognizing those sectors that have been hit the hardest and focusing on sustainability rather than putting band-aids on our current problems with short-term solutions. Mayor Therrien is part of the Eastern Ontario Mayors' Caucus, which comprises 11 urban municipalities and allows for sharing ideas that they can implement within their communities (Eastern). The EOMC meets quarterly and includes municipal Chief Administrative Officers to hold discussions on Eastern Ontario topics (Eastern). Another piece for the new playbook is the importance of setting up future Mayors for success if

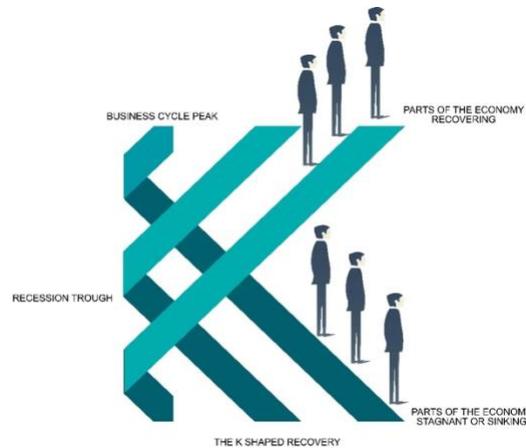
they face a crisis such as this again. It offers a window of opportunity to not look to other government levels for resources, but instead, coming up with ways to take care of themselves at the municipal level. The pandemic has paved the way for municipal governments to be more experimental and to take risks. Accomplishments in the field are faster than they have ever been, and the lesson here is to carry that momentum post-pandemic. The government can adapt quicker than it is formally used to, and the willingness to experiment is imperative even with the potential of failure.

### **3) Building Businesses Beyond Capacity**

There is an emphasis on maintaining sustainability beyond COVID-19, and some of the responses addressed will be permanent ones moving forward. Mayor Lehman addresses the steps taken in the City of Barrie to assist businesses in the long-term. The municipal government does not have access to resources that the provincial and federal governments do, such as wage subsidies. Instead, they focus on regulatory responses in the way they utilize their public spaces in accommodation. Some successful initiatives in the City of Barrie include “Business in the Park,” which allows for safe outdoor activities using responsive public spaces like yoga classes run by former Olympian Ann Green (Business). “Digital Main St” is another program done in partnership with other levels of government to grow online capacity for businesses that lack sufficient online reach. This program is seen as a permanent benefit to businesses post-COVID-19 in building and maintaining B2B capacity through digital transformation (Xcelerate). In Peterborough, Mayor Therrien is facing similar issues as the City of Barrie, and their response also includes the redeployment of public spaces. Peterborough faces a housing and homelessness issue as there is no 24-hour drop-in shelter available. In response, they took over a vacant community services building and converted it into an overflow shelter, so people have a place to go. Renovations are currently underway to make it more accessible. Mayor Therrien emphasizes despite the challenges of the past year, many small businesses in downtown Peterborough run by young female entrepreneurs have been successful in utilizing social media to their advantage to keep their businesses afloat.

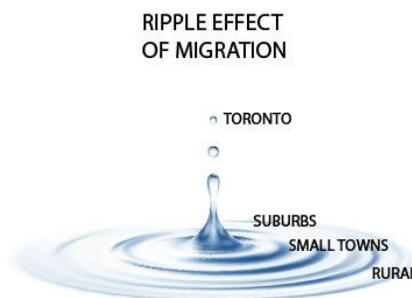
Creativity, innovation, and adaptability have been critical factors in some sectors. Peterborough has a large senior population, which has proved challenging in the transition to online with reduced access to the internet and applications like Zoom. It seems the art of the phone call has made a comeback, and this inclusivity to all of life’s stages and abilities is at the forefront of their strategic plans. Mayor David Bailey in Brant County noted that his region is doing well financially, and the finances acquired from higher levels of government have gone into infrastructure, transit, and reserves for future projects. Brant County took the approach of redeployments of staff in response to the pandemic’s pressures. As staff contracts were coming to an end or potential layoffs were on the table, they quickly transferred personnel over to the by-law department. There was a sudden demand for by-law officers to handle a growing number of pandemic-related complaints. Looking at potential trends post-COVID-19, Mayor Lehman believes that the pressure for an urban form of growth will continue outside of the greenbelt.

Support for the economy will need to differ as returning to normalcy will likely cause a K-Shaped Recovery. This post-recession illustrates one segment of the economy experiencing an upward climb while another experiences a decline (Aldrich).



#### 4) Toronto Diaspora

According to Ari Altstedter, a reporter for the Financial Post, the City of Toronto saw a 132% surge in rental supply compared to a year before in 2020 (Bloomberg News and Altstedter). This data was released from the Toronto Regional Real Estate Board (TRREB) and ultimately shows that COVID-19 and the surge in people working from home have prompted residents to move to smaller cities offering better value for their money in the form of square footage. The Mayoral panel agreed that they have seen an increased real estate demand within their city boundaries. Mayor Lehman quoted fellow economist and colleague Mike Moffat when he stated that city migration into smaller, rural cities mimics a ripple effect. Those who live in large city centres similar to Toronto are now realizing they do not need to pay such a high price for a small amount of space; they can move to a smaller city while they work from home. Uncomfortable with a rapid influx of city residents the rural community is slowly migrating further north to maintain their space and isolation to which they are accustomed. Altstedter also reports that the number of condos listed for sale has more than doubled in the final three months of 2020 from the same period in 2019 (2021). For larger urban cities and even across the Greater Toronto Area, this creates a lot of vacant space as offices downsize their commercial footprint. With the tolerance for quick decision-making inherently high, it would be in the municipalities' best interest to seriously consider the reuse of commercial and residential spaces.



## **Conclusion**

When it comes to leadership in times of disaster, there is no playbook. However, when municipalities get together and share ideas, they can take risks and be creative in helping their communities adapt to challenging situations. These solutions can not only be for the short-term but long-term ones to ensure success. Innovative responses to pandemic-related issues, concepts related to the staff and other municipality figures, private and public municipal relationships, and other necessities, were the lessons learned. Focus must be placed on assisting those sectors that are at a disadvantage post-pandemic.

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