

National Urban Agenda Needed

According to the 2006 Census, over 80% of Canadians live in Canada's largest urban areas, anchored by the conglomerates of Toronto, Montreal, Vancouver, Ottawa-Gatineau, Edmonton and Calgary. Canada's city regions are not only hubs of people; they also act as economic drivers for the entire country. In both times of economic prosperity and especially during periods of economic recession, successful and healthy urban areas are crucial to Canada's long-term economic success. However, Canada's lack of a concerted urban strategy is hampering the ability of Canada's cities to act as strong engines of growth and fulfill their role as necessary drivers for Canada's economic recovery.

Canada's urban areas act as hubs of economic growth. The Institute on Competitiveness and Prosperity has noted that urban areas provide a necessary environment for sustained economic progress, with positive links between urbanization and productivity (Source: Martin Institute for Prosperity Working Paper 2: *Measuring Ontario's Prosperity, Developing an Economic Indicator System*). According to conclusions reached in *Compete to Win*, the final report from the Competition Policy Review Panel, "large, dynamic urban centres have a national importance that transcends their significance to a region or a province, in the same way the national railways were recognized in the 1800s as having a national significance." (Source: *Compete to Win, Competition Review Panel*, June 2008)

A national urban strategy should address at least three key areas: transportation and other infrastructure; immigrant settlement and integration; and affordable housing.

Transportation:

As Canada's urban areas continue to grow, there has been a lack of necessary investment in transportation infrastructure, both to support existing infrastructure and to construct additional capacity. A report by TD Bank, *Mind the Gap – Finding Money to Upgrade Canada's Aging Public Infrastructure*, estimated that the cost of repairing and replacing current civic infrastructure needs to meet current requirements ranges from \$50 billion to \$125 billion. Such estimates do not include any additional transportation needs to meet the requirement of Canada's growing urban population.

Immigration:

Ninety-seven percent of Canada's immigrants settle in urban centres, with 69% of all immigrants to Canada settling in Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver (Source: Statistics Canada, *Immigration in Cities*). According to research compiled by the Federation of Canadian Municipalities, immigrants to Canada and specifically immigrants to Canada's largest urban areas face greater socio-economic challenges than non-immigrants. For example, recent immigrants face an unemployment rate that is 1.6 times higher than for non-immigrants. This statistic increases to 2.3 times higher when examining immigrant populations in Canada's largest urban areas (Federation of Canadian Municipalities, *Quality of Life in Canadian Municipalities – Immigration and Diversity in Canadian Cities and Communities*).

Housing:

Canada's Census Metropolitan Areas (CMA) account for a disproportionate share of the country's population growth; in Central Canada, for example, CMAs now account for almost 95% of overall population growth. Even in regions of Canada that are experiencing little net population growth, urban areas continue to grow. Such significant growth in constricted areas has led to remarkable pressures on urban house prices. According to research by the Federation of Canadian Municipalities, housing prices in urban areas significantly outpaces income growth. Furthermore less than nine per cent of all housing units completed in Canada's largest cities between 2001 and 2006 were rental units. (Source: Federation of Canadian Municipalities, *Quality of Life in Canadian Municipalities – Immigration and Diversity in Canadian Cities and Communities*).

According to *Toronto as a Global City: Scorecard on Prosperity*, a landmark study undertaken by the Toronto Board of Trade which compared the economic and labour attractiveness of 21 global urban regions, Toronto and other Canadian cities fared well when it came to their livability indicators. This result reaffirms the findings of other annual international rankings on livability, such as the *Economist Magazine's* "Worlds Most Livable Cities." Economically, though, Canadian metropolises continue to trail their international competitors, exhibiting mediocre performance on such economic indicators as GDP per capita, GDP growth, and productivity. Canada tends to lag other jurisdictions in terms of senior-level government support for urban regions. Many believe that greater senior government support would have a demonstrable impact on the economic performance of Canada's cities.

National and international actors have commented on Canada's urban policies. The Competition Policy Review Panel recognized the national importance of Canada's largest urban centres and recommended that the federal government "provide leadership to deal with critical urban issues," while the OECD has declared that Canada's urban policies are "disjointed". International research supports establishing national urban policies as a way to promote national economic growth. The European Institute for Comparative Urban Research (EURICOR) monitors national urban policies of 15 EU member states and concludes that countries with a national urban policy "understand their large cities as regions of the economy, and have woken up to the fact that the motor can be stalled by social inequality or environment degradation." (Source: European Institute for Comparative Urban Research, *National Urban Policies in the European Union*)

As the Toronto Board's of Trade's *Scorecard on Prosperity* showed, some Canadian cities perform well on an international basis. Without a national urban agenda, though, Canadian cities are at risk of becoming less globally competitive and falling behind their global competitors.

Recommendations

That the federal government work in concert with the provinces and territories to establish a National Urban Agenda including:

1. A national urban transportation plan that provides sustainable and predictable funding for urban transit systems, promotes the use of public private partnerships in urban infrastructure projects.

2. Urban immigration and education programs that are designed to meet the needs of Canada's growing immigrant population and ensure that Canada's immigration policy is coordinated in conjunction with municipal services.
3. A national affordable housing plan to address homelessness and the relatively high cost of living in urban regions.