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'Strong mayor' called key

Give mayor the power to hire and fire city manager and pay councillors on executive more, report says

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CITY HALL BUREAU

Toronto would be better managed if the mayor had more power and was surrounded by a select group of well-paid councillors who helped to set city priorities

But for that to happen – and it could happen quickly – Toronto council must fully use the powers handed it under the new City of Toronto Act.

That's a key proposal from a blue-ribbon panel organized by Mayor David Miller in October to look at the city's books and identify savings.

Yesterday the panel offered up a wide range of ways for the city to cut costs but warned that little can be done without changing the way business is conducted at city hall.

"You have to get governance right before you're able to really bring in these other ideas and get them executed properly," said panel member Larry Tanenbaum.

The other ideas include finding ways to get more revenue from city-owned Toronto Hydro, the Toronto Parking Authority and Enwave, finding budget savings, and raising new money with tolls and fees.

Implementing them "means a strong mayor system," Tanenbaum said.

Mayor David Miller should be able to hire, fire and issue orders to the city manager, the city's top bureaucrat, who oversees a workforce of 37,000 direct employees and 13,000 more who work for city agencies, the six-member panel said.

The current system, whereby city manager Shirley Hoy reports to the entire 45-member council, is "unwieldy, difficult to operate, and diffuses accountability, authority and responsibility," the report said.

The result is that it's more difficult to get things done, panel chair Blake Hutcheson said. "The city needs to be able to set priorities," he said in an interview. "It's about trying to get a structure in place where our city can say, 'These are the six things that matter,' as opposed to having 44 different (councillors) agendas."

It's not the first time Miller and council have been told they should support a strong-mayor system.

The recommendations echo those of the Governing Toronto Advisory Panel, a three-member body that reported in 2005 on how to better focus on civic priorities.

"I think we're all saying the same thing; you do need a strong mayor concept," said Martin Connell, who served on the 2005 panel.

However, council balked at endorsing the proposal in 2005.

Since then, the city has lurched from budget crisis to budget crisis – until Miller finally won a long struggle last year to introduce a controversial land transfer tax and vehicle registration fee. Still, the city has not yet settled its fiscal problems.

The provincial government does have the power to step in and force changes if city council won't.

Both governance reports call for higher pay for council's 13-member executive committee, which includes the councillors who chair key committees such as public works, planning and parks.

All councillors earn the same – almost \$97,000 annually – but those on the executive deserve a significant raise, Connell said.

"It has to be based on the responsibilities that are attached to the job."

Nobody's asking for a raise, stressed Councillor Joe Mihevc, who chairs the community development and recreation committee. "I'm not asking for more money for my work," Mihevc said.

"However, it is a lot more work. I take some comfort in the panel noting that being chair of a committee is a substantial volume of work."