

SUPPORT LOCAL BUSINESS

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2020

Supporting local businesses through the pandemic

My top priority since the pandemic hit has been to support local businesses. From Day 1, I've been working side-by-side with Toronto businesses to weather this storm, working around the clock to hear their concerns, be their voice at City Hall, and advocate to the Provincial and Federal governments.

We had to move quickly to get organized, open all lines of communication, and prepare a clear message to get businesses the support they needed. Here's a closer look at some of the areas where we made a difference together and the work still ahead.



Brad Bradford, Toronto City Councillor
Beaches—East York | Ward 19

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Taking emergency action

March to April, 2020

When Ontario started locking down I called on Mayor Tory to take action to support small businesses. We deferred tax payments, set up an emergency relief fund, urged cooperation between landlords and tenants, and planned to stimulate business recovery. I led the small business file for the Task Force on Economic Rebuild and Recovery engaging over ~300 businesses through a survey and held 30 hours of roundtables to understand their needs.

In the face of the crisis, we focused our efforts on three areas:

1. Immediate action on tax relief so bills wouldn't put people out of business;
2. Clear-communication on the resources and programs being announced;
3. Setting a clear agenda for Federal and Provincial governments who have resources to pay the costs of the pandemic.

Advocating for rent relief, stopping evictions

April to June, 2020

The priority for most local businesses was rent relief. Mayor Tory and I held discussions with the Minister of Small Business to push for a rent relief program. I also worked with the Province to implement a commercial eviction moratorium after residential evictions were halted early on.

The Canada Emergency Commercial Rent Assistance (CECRA) program was not announced until April; and applications didn't open until after June rent was due. After an intense period of advocacy, the Federal Government adapted the program to include more businesses.

The Premier announced the commercial eviction moratorium on June 9th. On my weekly calls with Toronto's 83 Business Improvement Areas (BIA), the difference for businesses was palpable.

Calling for clear public health guidelines, helping studios and sports organizations

June to December, 2020

As the Province built a reopening framework and a geography-based approach to public health measures, I heard from business owners about inconsistencies in the rules. Dance/yoga studios and karate clubs couldn't offer private instruction or limit groups. These businesses were closed while closer-contact activities like salons re-opened.

Similar concerns continue with Toronto's second lockdown, with main street retailers closed, but big box stores staying open. I am in continuous dialogue with the Province to elevate these concerns. While the City doesn't make these decisions, we are significantly impacted by them and can help the Province understand the effects of their policies.

Reforming commercial property taxes, supporting main streets

September to present

Problems with the Province's assessment system under their Municipal Property Assessment Corporation have contributed to main street vacancies for years. One issue is small businesses being taxed like condo developments. Another is that there are only two commercial tax bands in Toronto; properties assessed below \$1 million and above \$1 million. That doesn't leave many options to make smart tax policies.

The pandemic increased the urgency to reform this broken system. I took action at the October Council meeting getting unanimous support to begin the work to introduce new tax bands in the 2021 budget. My motion also asked the Province to create a new "main street retail" assessment class—something only they can do. I also asked the City to look at other measures to help long-term small business recovery such as reducing roadblocks for entrepreneurs, creating a pop-up business license and supporting Black-owned businesses.

Reducing fees for meal delivery platforms

April to December, 2020

Restaurant owners have been vocal about commissions taken by meal service platforms, as high as 30%. The Mayor's office, business owners and I worked directly with the platforms to help support new businesses. Many offered incentives, but Toronto-based Ritual partnered with the City to offer no-fee access. I joined Councillor Ford in asking the Province to cap fees as restaurants continue to face challenges. The Province responded quickly, introducing legislation to cap commissions at 15%.

Stopping evictions (again), improving rent relief

August to December, 2020

As the second lockdown came into effect, calls to extend the eviction moratorium continued. Local businesses are clear about needing this. City Council voted unanimously for my motion asking the Province to stop evictions, but we're still waiting for decisive action. The Federal Government relaunched the CECRA program as the Canada Emergency Rent Subsidy, allowing small businesses to apply directly for the program.

Looking ahead, why it matters

The Province has signaled they're willing to work on better policies. In their 2021 budget, they announced funding to reduce property taxes for municipalities that opt-in. Details are pending, but there are signs that important financial relief is on the table. The stories of local businesses' journeys through the pandemic have been heartbreaking, and their resilience—inspiring. Many local businesses are owned by neighbours who poured themselves into their life's work, playing an important role in building our community. Main streets are the backbone of our communities. They're the fuel that keeps Canada's economic engine going and they're the reason I've been urging governments to approach this crisis with the mindset that small business is too big to fail.