

Deputation Made by Sabra Ripley to Toronto City Council Budget Committee

Hello everyone, are you enjoying yourselves this evening?

I know you've all been working very hard today, so I'd like to thank you for letting me speak this evening. I promise not to be acrimonious [reference to past presentations] and I will try and be brief.

I wanted to tell you about an event I was at this evening downstairs - a Town Hall organized by BeautifulCity.ca. There were about 160 people at the event – artists and creative people of all ages from across Toronto – citizens. Some of the City Councillors on this Committee were kind enough to join us and speak about the very difficult work that you are doing here.

The consensus from the Town Hall is that we understand the problems you are facing in balancing this budget

and we want to work with you

and we feel that we have been working with you

and we believe that funding for the arts can be part of the solution.

Funding in the arts is an efficient way of investing in the economy. As others have mentioned this evening the amounts we're talking about investing are tiny, but they can lead to very substantial economic growth. I'm sure you've heard about the report that found 1 dollar invested into the arts in a region can create 8 dollars in general economic growth for that region. Or heard from festivals like Pride about the funding their event brings into Toronto's economy. Or read reports like that of the Martin Prosperity Institute that highlight the economic benefits of investment in arts and arts institutes.

I work in Public Health and Community Development. For me, health is a broad concept that includes both mental and physical health. And creating health means addressing the social determinants of health – like economic capacity, environment, social capital, community, etcetera. I am very interested in how arts and particularly arts in public spaces can contribute to health. Of course there are the physical health impacts – increased activity and engagement with people out visiting in areas with public art - but I'm even more interested in the mental health impacts. We live in a city with a lot of spread out neighbourhoods and new immigrants, for many whom English is not a first language. These kinds of situations can lead to many mental health issues like social isolation. But art is a powerful tool that can bring people together, both to create art and to enjoy it, overcoming problems like social isolation and building social ties and capital.

So for me a strong, healthy community needs the kind of investment that increases property values, generates business and boosts tourism; that discourages crime, encourages civic engagement, promotes physical activity and mental health.

Investment in arts in public spaces can do all of that and so much more – the list of benefits goes on and on.

So we understand that you're struggling to balance this budget, but we are trying to help.

Our proposal to create a billboard tax and put it toward funding public arts is part of what we see as a long term solution to the kind of short term problems you are facing here.

You know, a lot of really interesting things were said during the Town Hall this evening, but there was one that really stood out for me. So often civil society groups come to government looking for support and government says to them, it sounds like you have a great idea, but we don't have the funds to support it. Maybe if you could find the money, we'd be able to help.

That is exactly what's happened here, but this group went and found the money – with the billboard tax – and now they're being told thanks for the money, but we still can't help you.

This is an amazing example of civic engagement. I know that the arts community may not get everything that we're hoping for today, but I think that it's important that this effort be recognized and that the arts sees some of the funds they've worked so hard to raise. Especially considering the age of many of the people, many of whom are young - these are people who could remain involved in politics for a long time to come. This makes it especially important that this civic engagement movement be recognized.

So we see this proposal to put more of the money raised through the billboard tax toward funding art in public space as part of a long term solution for creating a stronger, more economically and culturally vibrant city in the long term. A city we can all be proud to live in.

Thank you.