

# KRISTINA SMELSER

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The following is a memo written to Toronto mayor John Tory for the course *Community Health & Human Development*. It contextualizes the now-terminated proposal by Alphabet's company Sidewalk Labs to build a smart neighborhood in Waterfront Toronto, discussing existing health and economic inequities within the city. It then offers several strategies that Mayor Tory can pursue in order to mitigate these inequities and promote social welfare through the project.

TO: Mayor of Toronto John Tory

FROM: Kristina Smelser

SUBJECT: Health equity concerns and recommendations regarding future Quayside development

DATE: May 8, 2020

Dear Mayor John Tory,

Thank you for steadfast dedication to health equity as mayor of Toronto; through your *Toronto Poverty Reduction Strategy* of 2015, it is clear that you have taken on a leadership role in alleviating socioeconomic and racial inequities. These inequities are formidable: as you note in the report, income inequality in Toronto has risen faster than in any other major Canadian city since 1980, and health disparities have widened correspondingly. In recognition of this pressing problem, your commitments, and Sidewalk Labs' development plans for Quayside, this memo analyzes Quayside's potential health equity implications. It also proposes strategies to mitigate such implications while ultimately advancing the city's economic and health equity initiatives. These strategies can be summarized as follows:

1. Ensure the new Quayside neighborhood prioritizes inclusion of low-income residents of color.
2. Create a Quayside labs advisory board jointly run by the government of Toronto and a diverse, representative group of community members.
3. Ensure the democratic and transparent publication of collected data, and explicitly use this data to reduce health, economic, and racial inequities.
4. Develop an economic equity plan for Waterfront Toronto and incorporate it into Sidewalk Lab's project blueprint and Toronto government's existing health equity initiatives.

## **1. Ensure the new Quayside neighborhood prioritizes inclusion of low-income residents of color.**

Despite valiant efforts to mitigate systemic inequalities within Toronto, these inequalities still profoundly impact residents. As you stated in your *Poverty Reduction Strategy* mentioned above, 33% of residents of color, 30% of residents with disabilities, 37% of female single parents, and 46% of recent immigrant residents live in poverty in Toronto. A Toronto Public Health Surveillance and Epidemiology Unit report titled *The Unequal City 2015: Income and Health Inequities in Toronto* reaffirms these statistics, acknowledging that child poverty rates in Toronto are among the highest in Canada. According to this study, if all income groups in Toronto had the same health status as the highest-income group, there would be 62,111 fewer people with diabetes, as well as 932 fewer premature deaths and 611 fewer low birth weight babies per year. This association between low income and poor health outcomes accentuates the need to improve economic opportunity and social support for Toronto's vulnerable residents.

This economic hardship is distributed unevenly across Toronto; the *Ontario Community Health Profiles Partnership*, an online tool created by the government of Ontario, public health professionals, researchers, and clinicians, geospatially depicts these pockets of poverty and poorer health outcomes that are concentrated in specific neighborhoods, particularly on the outskirts of Toronto's boundary. Indeed, residents of Waterfront Toronto tend to be more wealthy, middle-aged, and employed than the rest of the city, according to the 2018 analysis titled "Waterfront Communities: The Island" published by the Toronto government's Social Policy, Analysis and Research (SPAR) Unit.

It is within this context that the Quayside plan lies. Sidewalk Labs's webpage *Waterfront Toronto's Priority Outcomes* advertises its 12-acre future neighborhood as accessible to low-income

residents, ensuring that 40% of units will be offered at below-market rates. However, although this pledge initially appears impressive, they then disclose that just 20% of units will be reserved as affordable housing, with the other 20% reserved for middle-income households. Considering the aforementioned prevalence of poverty, this plan is insufficient, allowing the majority of Quayside neighborhood's housing to be catered to high- and medium-high-income households. It will only further perpetuate the city's geographically-mediated income inequality and corresponding health inequities.

Rather than accepting this inadequate proposal, you can instead prioritize your *Toronto Poverty Reduction Strategy* pledge to improve access to and quantity of affordable housing, given its importance in mitigating place-based health inequities; indeed, the project offers a unique opportunity to provide low-cost, high-quality housing to Toronto's most socioeconomically disadvantaged residents. I propose that the city government ensure at least 50% of new units will be reserved as affordable housing, 25% for middle-income households, and 25% offered at the market-rate price. While this will require a greater upfront investment and subsidization by Sidewalk Labs, the city can perhaps negotiate a lower price for the initial sale of land to the company, currently estimated at \$590 million.

Further, the long-term economic payoff of this investment will be considerable, considering the economic and health benefits that it will provide to Quayside's low-income residents. Providing reliable, safe, and affordable housing not only reduces toxic stress, hazardous environmental exposures, violence, and homelessness; it also frees income for use in health care, nutritious food, education, and other essential resources. The neighborhood will provide residents close proximity to businesses, allowing for easier and more affordable transportation to employers, grocery stores, and other important destinations. Finally, the ample spaces to play, explore, and interact with one's community, which are currently limited in many low-income neighborhoods, will improve the physical, mental, and social health of residents.

## **2. Create a Quayside labs advisory board jointly run by the government of Toronto and a diverse, representative group of community members.**

One of the key principles of equitable community engagement is the inclusion and involvement of the community during every step of a project. Thus, it is not enough just to ensure that a substantial share of Quayside neighborhood housing is reserved for low-income residents; it is imperative that you also engage the community during the various planning, development, and implementation stages as well. Although Sidewalk Labs claimed to have discussed their plans with Toronto residents through advisory panels, the *NY Times* article from November of 2019 "How Toronto Reined In Big Tech" explains that these panels and meetings were managed exclusively by Sidewalk Labs. The company has failed to articulate which residents were included or how involvement of these residents has impacted its development plans. Given this lack of transparency, one could imagine that Toronto's disadvantaged residents have been vastly underrepresented; indeed, it is typically more difficult for such individuals to make the sacrifices, such as taking time off work and travel expenses, necessary to partake in such panels.

If Sidewalk Labs neglects these residents' concerns during the stages of development, they may inadvertently create access barriers and exacerbate inequities. For example, if low-income residents lack the technology, such as a smartphone or Broadband Internet connection, that is needed to use future Quayside services like shared mobility (e.g. ride-share or bike-share), these individuals will be excluded from what is intended to be affordable transportation. Or if the company fails to consider the specific needs of residents with disabilities, they might construct housing or transportation that is inaccessible to these folks. Such examples of unintentional inequity may be prevalent if Sidewalk Labs proceeds without allowing the voices of disadvantaged residents to be heard.

In light of these implications, the city of Toronto should develop its own Quayside advisory board jointly managed by community members, various government employees, and Sidewalk Labs developers. This entity can use Chicago's Array of Things Initiative as a model for effective collaborative design; the project has recruited a community of residents for regular feedback using multiple strategies, including online engagement, in-person meetings, and language translation (particularly important given that 53% of Toronto residents' first language is not English, according to the aforementioned SPAR analysis). By

recruiting residents who experience economic, social, and health-related disadvantages and providing them with multiple options for engagement, this advisory board can allow these residents an equal say in the decisions made regarding their future neighborhood. This strategy will progress Toronto's equity initiatives by prioritizing the greatest needs and barriers faced by the city's disadvantaged residents.

### **3. Ensure the democratic and transparent publication of collected data, and explicitly use this data to reduce health, economic, and racial inequities.**

As you are aware, Sidewalk Labs intends to use ubiquitous sensors to collect mass amounts of environmental and human data. The company's objective is to maximize systems' technological efficiencies in order to save money, preserve natural resources, and inform development plans of future smart cities. This proposal, however, has ignited justifiable local resistance about privacy concerns, given that the company has resisted yielding control over the storage and processing of the collected data. Indeed, Sidewalk Lab's data collection plans present both considerable risks and potential benefits, depending on how the city allows the project to proceed.

Information technology has the ability to perpetuate inequities, especially if the historical data it uses is based on discriminatory behavior. This effect has proliferated especially in criminal justice; many technologies designed to assess someone's likelihood of committing a crime or of reoffending after being released have codified bias against people of color, as explained by *WIRED*'s 2019 article "Supposedly 'Fair' Algorithms Can Perpetuate Discrimination." If implemented in Quayside, sensors may collect data that similarly discriminates against disadvantaged groups; for example, if some residents of color avoid riding public transportation because they are unfamiliar with the service or fear being profiled, analysts may erroneously conclude that folks of this demographic are a hindrance to the system's ultimate success. In light of these risks, the city of Toronto should systematize the accountability of data analytics: for example, the toolkit called *Aequitas*, developed by the UChicago Center for Data Science and Public Policy, allows policymakers to evaluate machine learning models for biases and discrimination. This toolkit would also align well with Sidewalk Labs' commitment (articulated in their 2019 "Overview of Realignment of MIDP Threshold Issues") to ensure that data governance and privacy proposals do not impede "freedom of expression, equitable treatment of marginalized groups, and public engagement."

It is possible, however, to not only avoid impeding these rights, but also to actively leverage data to mitigate health, economic, and racial inequalities. Neither Sidewalk Labs nor the city of Toronto has committed to using collected data for this objective, which is distinct from efficiency. However, a growing number of cities are beginning to initiate such efforts, given that data has potential to improve the accountability and transparency in public decision-making. As discussed in the Urban Institute's 2019 report *Technology and Equity in Cities: Emerging Challenges and Opportunities*, government-owned data that is published and made accessible for download can allow individuals to monitor decisions that affect them; the report provides an example of the Cleveland Healthy Home Data Collaborative's tool, which enables residents to look up the risks of lead and other environmental exposures.

Thus, rather than privatizing all collected data and preventing the public from understanding its uses, the government of Toronto can work in collaboration with the new Quayside Community Advisory Panel and the Canadian Civil Liberties Association (a strong advocate against Sidewalk Labs' data collection proposals) to develop a digital framework for its open access. The nonprofit *Sunlight Foundation* published its "Tactical Data Engagement Framework" in 2017, providing data collectors with guidelines for encouraging effective community use; in it, they note the importance of contextualizing data with outreach and engagement, and of using data to improve the accountability and equity of government-mediated activities. This initiative would require full transparency about sensor locations and footage captured to ensure the public is adequately informed and involved.

### **4. Develop an economic equity plan for Waterfront Toronto and incorporate it into Sidewalk Lab's project blueprint and Toronto government's existing health equity initiatives.**

In the absence of a systems-wide, cross-disciplinary commitment to health and economic equity, even the most impressive technologies will fail to sustain desired social improvement. As articulated in

the aforementioned Urban Institute report, smart technology “must be coupled with a political agenda to address structural inequities created by past policy decisions. Without an explicit commitment to equity or intentionality in design, inequities may be amplified by technology instead of diminished” (p. 25). This is where the Toronto city government, and especially you as Mayor, can incorporate your existing economic and health equity initiatives into the proposal: for example, by setting target rates for health outcomes such as premature death, low birth weight, and cases of diabetes, as well as for non-health indices like income level and educational attainment. Government analysts and policymakers can use data to track progress towards these targets within the Quayside neighborhood, relative to other parts of Toronto.

That said, it is important that this multifaceted equity plan builds upon, rather than takes away resources from, pre-existing equity initiatives. If successful, it will help progress Toronto’s Public Health strategies (as described on the City of Toronto website) to prioritize the most marginalized, shine a light on critical health equity issues, and develop high quality programs and services for a diverse city. This commitment is essential for continuing to shift the focus of the city’s resources, attention, and efforts towards the wellbeing of vulnerable residents of Toronto.

### **Next Steps**

In summary, the Quayside plan offers you as mayor an exciting opportunity to tackle Toronto’s systemic health and economic inequities. I recommend you take the following immediate measures: 1) Ensure that the new Quayside neighborhood prioritizes inclusion of low-income residents of color; 2) Create a Quayside labs advisory board jointly run by the government of Toronto and a diverse, representative group of community members; 3) Ensure the democratic and transparent publication of collected data, and explicitly use this data to reduce health, economic, and racial inequities; and 4) Develop an economic equity plan for Waterfront Toronto and incorporate it into Sidewalk Lab’s project blueprint and Toronto government’s existing health equity initiatives. While extensive, these commitments will foster enduring improvements in the wellbeing of your city’s most vulnerable residents. Thank you for considering these recommendations, and I look forward to following the equitable development of Quayside in the future.