

# ARRESTED DEVELOPMENT

Staffing shortages threaten City Planning



A report produced by CUPE Local 79 (2016)

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In the fall of 2016, CUPE Local 79 surveyed its members in City Planning to better understand workload issues and potential impacts on services provided by the Division. Almost a third of the membership in Planning responded.

The findings sound alarms about growing workloads that are often unmanageable and overworked staff that are sometimes unable to meet legislated requirements. Our survey of planners shows that:

- 87% work overtime at least weekly, and 44% work over-time daily;
- About half rarely or never get paid for their overtime work;
- 92% don't think that the division has enough staff to complete work in a timely and satisfactory fashion;
- Of the 92% who said there are not enough staff to do the work, two-thirds believe the Division's ability to oversee development and implement the City's planning needs has 'significantly' decreased; and
- Over 90% are concerned, with almost two-thirds being "very concerned," about how City Council's direction to reduce City Planning's budget by 2.6% will affect their work and the services they provide.

In the spirit of rising to the challenges presented by a rapidly growing city, we asked our members to imagine what they could do if staffing levels were increased. They say that spending more time on files would allow them to develop increased sensitivity to area-specific issues and community concerns. Having more staff resources and more time would reduce errors, and up-front investment in quality that would reduce workloads down the line.

As one planner puts it: "Additional staff in development review would allow everyone to spend more time reviewing all aspects of an application and more time negotiating better applications and communicating with the public. All of which will result in a better city."

Our members in City Planning are essential to the health and vitality of our communities. Yet it's clear that the Division is under considerable pressure from rampant development, a growing number of requests for studies and reports, and increased complexity of planning in urban environments.

We've reached a critical state in City Planning that, left unchecked, could have significant costs.

We urge the Planning and Growth Management Committee and City Council to provide City Planning with the staff necessary to meet the challenge of building a livable city, with vibrant and distinct neighbourhoods, now and in the future.

## METHODOLOGY

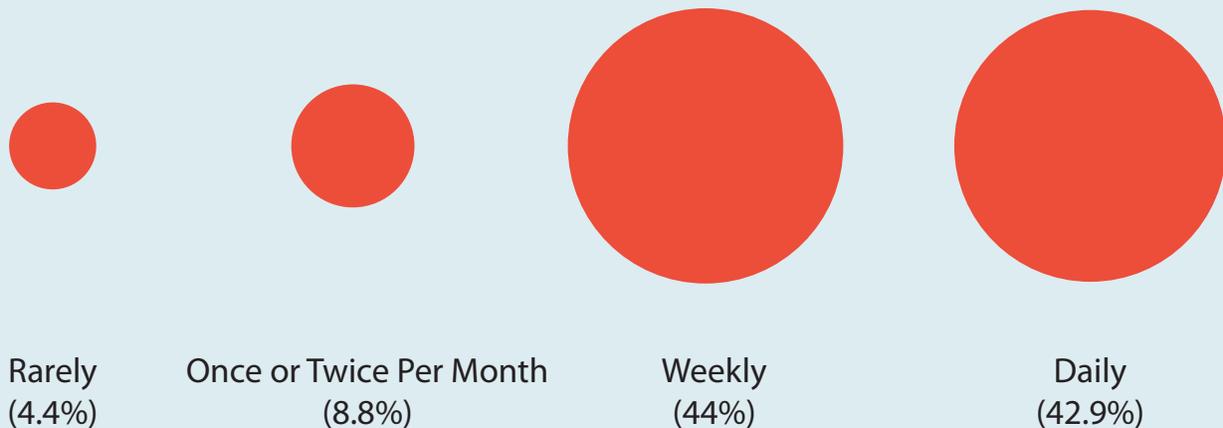
In October and early November of 2016, CUPE Local 79 surveyed its members in City Planning to better understand workload issues and potential impacts on services provided by the Division. The survey was completed through an online platform and included both open-ended and closed questions. This allowed us to capture planners' concerns in their own voices as well as through the statistical 'big picture.' Almost a third of the membership in Planning 91 responded.

The results show that the majority of members regularly work overtime, believe that there are not enough staff to do the work in a timely and satisfactory manner, and are very concerned about the impact of the proposed 2.6% cut to the division's budget in 2017.

## OVERTIME IS RAMPANT AND LARGELY UNPAID

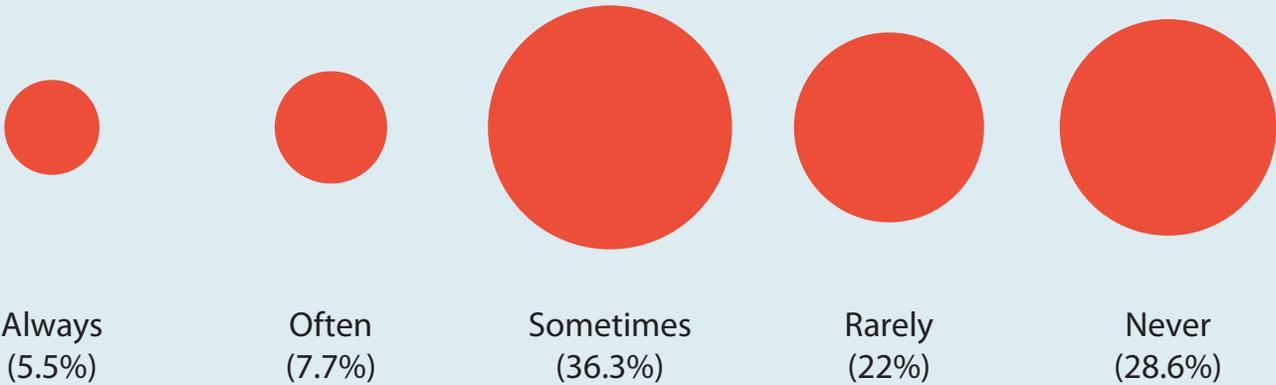
The survey's findings in regards to overtime are astounding, with 87% of respondents reporting that they work through their lunch or over their regular hours at least weekly. For 43% of respondents, overtime work is a daily occurrence.

**How often do you work through your lunch or more than your regular work hours?**



It would seem from the survey responses that much of the overtime accumulated by staff is unreported and untracked. Overtime is generally monitored through additional wages that are paid to compensate staff for the additional work. However, only about 13% report being regularly compensated when they work overtime. Just over a third say they are sometimes paid for their overtime work and half report that they are rarely or never paid for overtime.

**Do you get paid overtime when you work through your lunch or beyond your regular hours?**



Members’ concerns about the health impacts of overtime work are evident in comments made through the opened-ended questions discussed below. These concerns are well founded. A recent article from the Harvard Business Review looked at research from around the world that shows working overtime is bad for employee health and a company’s bottom line.<sup>1</sup> Overworked employees get sick more often and are more vulnerable to chronic diseases such as alcoholism, diabetes and heart disease.

*“Right now I am not giving any of my projects or files sufficient attention because I am overwhelmed. And even still I am working overtime.”*

Therefore, savings supposedly achieved by having employees work overtime without compensation may disappear as absentee and turn-over rates and health costs increase. The article also points out that staff teams tend to be more productive when they aren’t overworked.

City Planning has always had a strong sense of professional collegiality among its employees, but respondents to our survey signal that morale is taking a hit due to overwork and, as explained below, lack of proper staffing levels to achieve the excellent standard of work to which Toronto’s planners aspire. There is a wealth of research showing strong correlations between staff morale and productivity – if you feel good about your work, you are more likely to do good work.

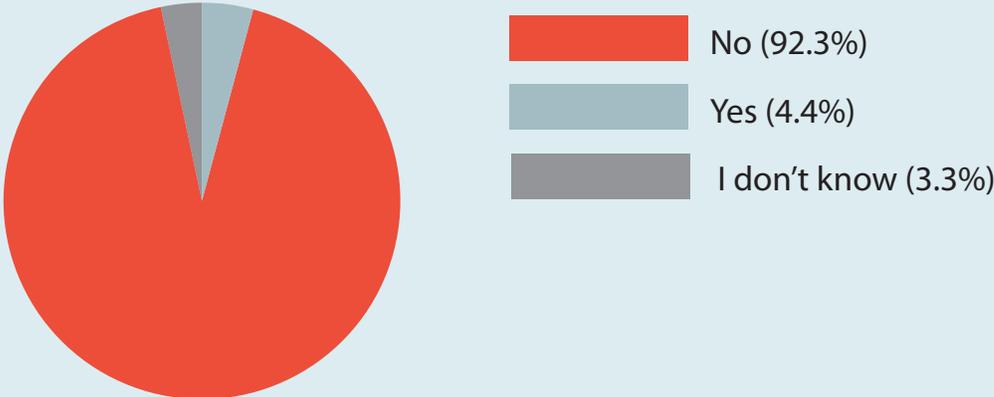
*“Staff mitigate staffing deficiencies by working through their lunch hours, in the evening, and at home. Because of this most work does get done in a timely fashion, at the employee’s expense.”*

# ACHIEVING BALANCE IN A GROWING CITY

Toronto is Canada’s largest city. It is one of the most diverse cities in the world. It is home to important heritage sites and globally respected architecture. Most importantly, though, Toronto is a collection of neighbourhoods. And the City’s planners are highly sensitive to the importance of balancing heritage, innovation and community. They also recognize that in a city as large and complex as Toronto, achieving this balance takes work. It’s difficult, but our planners are passionate about meeting the challenge of building a city that balances the desire to grow with the importance of place and community.

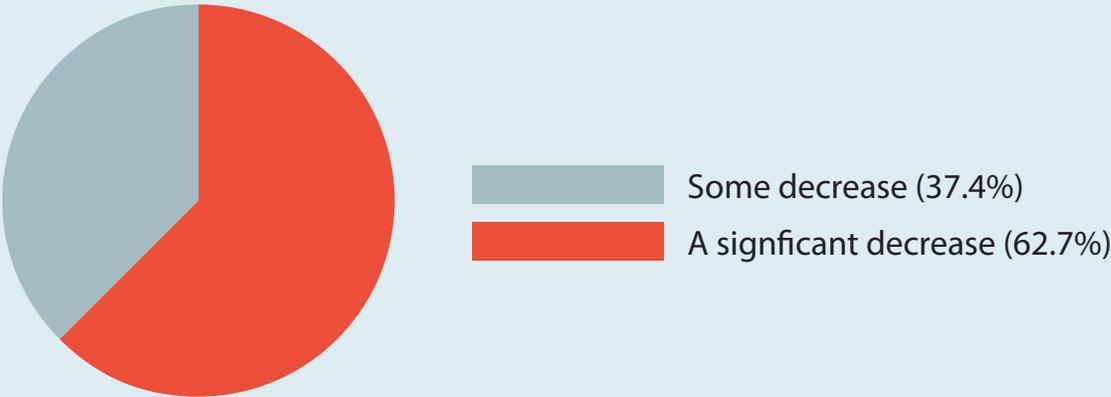
Staff shortages stymie planners’ passion. 92% of respondents told us there are not enough staff in their district or department to do their best work.

## Are there enough staff in your district or department to complete the work in a timely and satisfactory level?



Of the 92% who said that there are not enough staff to do the work, two-thirds said City Planning’s ability to oversee development and implement the city’s planning needs has ‘significantly’ decreased.

## If you answered ‘No’ on the previous question, please tell us to what extent, if any, current staffing limits have decreased City Planning’s ability to properly oversee development and implement the City’s planning needs.



We know the City can do better. In the spirit of rising to the challenges presented by a rapidly growing city, we asked our members to imagine what they could do if staffing levels were increased. We grouped the responses into concerns about detail, deadlines, the important work that gets left behind, and morale.

## Good Planning Takes Time

City planning is incredibly complex at the best of times. In Toronto, that complexity is heightened by the need for intensification, respect for established communities, diverse ideas about how Toronto should look and conflicts over transportation, public space, and density.

About a third of respondents express frustration over the fact that low staff levels mean they are able to spend less time on each file or application than they would like. They argue that spending more time on files would allow them to develop increased sensitivity to area-specific issues and community concerns. Having more staff resources and more time would reduce errors, and up-front investment in quality that would reduce workloads down the line.

As one planner puts it: “[With additional staff] I would be able to properly do my work. Because everything is so typically rushed, rash decisions are being made for serious matters. This causes a lot of worry after the fact about whether good decisions were made.”

The importance of ‘place’ in planning cannot be overstated. This means good planning relies on good community consultation and working closely with all stakeholders in a particular area or neighbourhood. Residents and City Councillors alike are all too familiar with the distress caused by developments that just don’t fit with the existing streetscape.

Unfortunately, many developers are more concerned with a quick return on their investment than in the long-term livability of communities. For our planners to understand communities and to help foster consensus on how to build those communities, there need to be enough staff to develop place-based expertise.

*“Additional staff in development review would allow everyone to spend more time reviewing all aspects of an application and more time negotiating better applications and communicating with the public. All of which will result in a better city.”*

*“Planning is place-based which requires planners to understand the context of planning areas (Districts) and have relationships with other City Planning units, ABCs, community organizations etc.”*

## Timeliness and Deadlines

About a quarter of the respondents refer explicitly to the impact staff shortages have on turnaround time for files. Several of the respondents point out that a timely response to applications is simply about good customer service. If Toronto wants to be attractive to innovators and developers, it needs to treat them with respect and assure them predictability in terms of the review process and timelines.

*“Staff, especially in the South District are regularly unable to meet key performance targets as legislated by the Planning Act. This is in large part due to workloads resulting from unprecedented development pressure concentrated in the Downtown area.”*

Beyond the importance of customer service, it is important to remember that City Planning is subject to legislatively defined deadlines. Failure to meet deadlines can have serious consequences.

Because they take pride in their work and are committed to ensuring the best planning practices prevail, staff do all they can to meet deadlines. They work through their breaks, they work unpaid overtime and (as discussed below) leave important projects untended. In the long-run, negative employee health and city-building outcomes result.

*“Reduced staffing and time spent on individual projects results in inefficiencies later in the process. More time and attention is needed to think, anticipate impacts, and undertake effective consultation and collaboration with subject experts.”*

## Staff shortages prevent capacity building

About a quarter of respondents also note that because they are often barely keeping their head above water in relation to legislated deadlines, they have to prioritize work based on the urgency of demand rather than on what is best for the public interest or for a broader city-building agenda. Planning studies, development guidelines, planning frameworks, community consultations and statistical/demographic studies all provide a more secure foundation for application reviews and decisions. However, planners tell us that they are too busy struggling to keep up to deadlines and day-to-day tasks to engage in long-term planning priorities.

*“[With additional staffing] We would be able to meet reasonable timelines on all of our work and complete additional City-initiated policy work to set a stronger framework to structure and guide change across the city rather than only reacting to new development pressure.”*

On a personal level, staff shortages also mean there is little time for professional development or improvements to workforce capacity. In 2015, Local 79 surveyed its members on training and training needs. One finding from that survey is particularly relevant to the issue of professional capacity-building in City Planning. More than a third of respondents to our training survey indicated that overwork, lack of shift coverage, gapping, or staff vacancies presented a major barrier to training. In fact, this problem was noted in the Auditor General's February 7, 2014 Review of Training, Conference and Related Travel Expenses. Indeed, numerous members reported that work time is not allocated for training that is related to their work – or indeed mandatory for the performance of their work – and they end up completing this training outside of work hours. Toronto's planners are dedicated professionals and the city benefits when they are able to expand their skills and knowledge.

## Improving Morale

Ultimately, it should not come as a surprise to find out that morale has suffered due to short-staffing. Increased workloads, the feeling of running just to keep up, and frustration at not being able to build the City's planning capacity undermine a sense of professional pride.

Adequate levels of staffing would go a long way toward proactively promoting employees' general health by reducing stress and burnout. As importantly, it would allow planners to express the full range of creativity, passion and enthusiasm they bring to serving Toronto's communities.

*“Morale is bad. Most people are drowning in work and stressed out. Most people I talk to are trying to figure out how they can get away from planning. If we had more staff we could actually do our jobs properly. People might even enjoy work again!”*

## POTENTIAL IMPACT OF A 2.6% CUT IN 2017

Over 90% of respondents indicate they are concerned, with almost two-thirds being “very concerned,” about how City Council’s direction to reduce City Planning’s budget by 2.6% will effect their work and the services they provide. Many are worried about gapping and staffing reductions and as a consequence, further increases in workloads that are already unmanageable. Others are concerned about the lack of career opportunities and professional growth in the face of the City’s unwillingness to adequately invest in the service. Some fear that budget cuts will significantly erode the quality of planning services provided by the City.

**Council has told each division to submit a 2017 budget that is 2.6% below it’s 2016 budget and absorb any increases due to inflation or other external factors. Please indicate how concerned you are, if at all, that this proposed budget cut will effect the services you provide?**



*“Toronto is experiencing unparalleled development pressures from tall buildings to transit planning. Without enough staff to properly do research, oversee developments, and provide good planning policies, we risk damaging the livability of the City.”*

*“For over a year we have been short staffed. Last week one colleague went on a sick leave partially because of stress and has serious health issues. I personally have health issues I would not have if fully staffed.”*

## CONCLUSION

Our members in City Planning are essential to the health and vitality of our communities. Yet it's clear that the Division is under considerable pressure from rampant development, a growing number of requests for studies and reports, and the increased complexity of planning in urban environments.

We've reached a critical state in City Planning that, left unchecked, could have significant cost. The findings of our survey sound alarms about growing workloads that are often unmanageable and overworked staff that are sometimes unable to meet legislated requirements. It all points to a division that is having a harder and harder time providing the services the meet the City's planning needs.

We urge the Planning and Growth Management Committee and City Council to provide City Planning with the staff necessary to meet the challenge of building a livable city, with vibrant and distinct neighbourhoods, now and in the future.

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<sup>1</sup> Carmichael, Sarah Green, Harvard Business Review Aug. 2015. "The Research Is Clear: Long Hours Backfire for People and for Companies". Accessed online on 11/14/16 at <https://hbr.org/2015/08/the-research-is-clear-long-hours-backfire-for-people-and-for-companies>