

Politics of the night

The creation of the “Night Mayor” job could change the way we see the city after dark

CRISTINA PETRUCCI



The little hand sits steadily in place on the five and the big hand inches ever closer to the top of the hour. Quitting time, finally! Suddenly everyone is rushing homewards, or to pick up their kids, dinner, or laundry. Or to get in on the last few minutes before the shops and businesses close.

But not everyone calls it a day as the evening approaches. There are those for whom this time may be the beginning (or continuation) of the work shift, and those for whom it's time to embark on a night's entertainment. Urban areas have usually excelled in creating and promoting nightlife. In a way, it is one of the things that brings many people to cities, as urban nights provide far more options than the suburbs or countryside. Yet nightlife activities have never been given the value they deserve.

Enter the night mayor. A night mayor is an ambassador of the night economy — the economic activity that takes place between (usually) the hours of 7 p.m. and 7 a.m. It may include dining, drinking, cultural entertainment (theatre, concerts, stand-up comedy), and nightclubs. The night mayor is a champion of these endeavours and behaves as an intermediary among city hall, residents, and businesses (restaurants, bars, music venues, and so on), ensuring that cities can be a great place to live, work, and party.

The concept of a night mayor is not new. Dutch cities like The Hague and Rotterdam have created this unofficial role since the 1970s (unofficial because this was a volunteer position). The idea of converting this role into a paid position was conceived in Amsterdam, from where it has

slowly caught on and been adopted in London, Paris, Berlin, Zurich, and most recently New York City, which recently named Ariel Palitz to the position.

Should our city be next? Why would a night mayor be a compelling fit for Toronto? For one thing, Toronto — like many cities — is experiencing mass gentrification that leads to rising rents, which have begun to slowly strangle nighttime

activities through the closures of music venues. From 2016 to 2017, an average of nine live music venues closed per year. The Toronto Music Advisory Council (TMAC) has spent the last couple of years discussing this issue and seeking to ensure the vibrancy and continued existence of music venues. The night mayor could work in tandem with TMAC to offer further support and discussion with the various stakeholders at play.



With a vibrant nightlife, additional measures to improve public facilities — transportation and public washrooms — are necessary to ensure urban safety and convenience. In late 2015, the TTC introduced “10-minutes-or-better” service for 52 routes along streetcar, subway, and bus lines. However, this service falls short for nighttime revelers as it only runs until 1 a.m., after which the low-frequency Blue Night network takes over. The night mayor could work with the TTC and City Hall to study the viability and benefits of pushing “10-minutes-or-better” transit service past 1 a.m.

Public washrooms in this city, meanwhile, are close to non-existent. There are only three, other than in public buildings (which usually close by 7 p.m.) and city parks (which are closed at night during the summer, and shut down entirely through the winter.) Meeting the need for this basic bodily function is left in the hands of co-operative restaurants and bars, which often demand a transaction for the use of a washroom. Compared to cities like Paris, Hong Kong and Miami that have an abundance of public washroom facilities, Toronto severely lags behind.

Urban safety will be a priority for a night mayor. If you’re advocating for a healthy nightlife, you need to promote responsible and safe behaviour from both city services and the denizens alike.

Toronto is home to influential, creative, and exciting events and festivals known around the world. The night mayor could assist and facilitate the planning and operation of these major annual festivals, since they bleed over into the



night. During some of these events — TIFF, Nuit Blanche, NXNE, Pride, Caribana — many bars and restaurants have been allowed to serve alcohol for an additional two hours, to 4 a.m. The night mayor would be the best advocate to represent the concerted interests of restaurants and bars for these kinds of events.

Although the night mayor’s role would focus on nocturnal activities, they could eventually widen their attention to other issues. Some that come to mind include campaigning for 24-hour libraries, extending community centre hours and heating/cooling stations, overseeing safe injection and overdose prevention sites, and assigning a protected area for sex work.

Promoting, encouraging, and managing nocturnal cultural activities create spillover gains in the form of additional sources of employment,

increased urban safety, and a boost to tourism. Having a night mayor office creates and endorses a collaborative approach for solving issues. A night mayor’s main objective would be to convince people that nighttime problems should be treated like daytime problems. Do not ban a liquor license for a bar or shut it down due to noise complaints; instead use daytime methods by bringing multiple stakeholders together and coming to an agreement with some sort of compromise. Celebrating nightlife is about more than simply partying: it is about seeing the value in the many facets of life during the night. If done well, it could turn empty nighttime streets into positive space for all. †

*top photo by Zhu;
previous page photo by Benson Chan*