

Get city services restored quickly

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Detailed plans for restoring Toronto's strike-battered city services won't be known until city manager Joe Pennachetti releases them later today, but one would hope the recovery will be more effectively handled than was the walkout, now in its 38th day.

Resumption of garbage collection, and the clearing of parks choked by trash, are obviously key concerns. But also high on management's to-do list should be restoration of services geared to children.

Toronto's swimming pools, camp programs, beaches, and parks – including Centre Island – provide summertime refuge to thousands of youngsters, especially those in low-income families without access to cottages and summer camps. For their sake, extra municipal staff should be dedicated to getting these summer services running as soon as possible, assuming that the tentative agreements are ratified by union members today and the city on Friday.

The task will take some time. According to a city news release, Toronto's neglected swimming pools, for example, will have to be cleaned and refilled before use. But that only underlines the urgency of getting started on such work – perhaps even by redeploying management and non-union staff right now, before the expected contract ratifications bring a formal end to the strike.

Common sense is also required in dealing with the heaps of uncollected trash built up in this city. Obviously, residents will need an amnesty from existing bin and bag limits and from penalties imposed on those with excess garbage. Everyone has an excess now.

On the other hand, city staff can't be expected to collect everyone's rubbish all at once. Needed is some rational system telling everyone how much extra trash they can put curbside, and over how long a period. One would expect the city's resumption-of-service plan to address this fundamental issue.

Furthermore, given that garbage collection is now done on a fee-for-service basis, some compensation seems in order for Toronto's long-suffering residents. After all, the city is – quite properly – issuing refunds to people who paid for daycare space and summer camps that they were unable to use due to the strike. It only seems fair to offer some money back to residents denied what will probably amount to six weeks of garbage collection.

Exactly how much money would depend on savings accrued as a result of the walkout. Toronto's last municipal strike resulted in a disappointing net cost of \$3.3 million to taxpayers. Millions were saved in unpaid wages, but that windfall was more than offset by strike-related expenses and lost revenue from user fees. What's different this time is that the current labour disruption has lasted three weeks longer than the 16-day strike of 2002. And a lengthy walkout presents more opportunity for daily savings to outweigh strike-related expenses, many of which involve high initial set-up costs.

Where we go from here is up to Mayor David Miller and the senior bureaucrats at city hall. It is vitally important that the resumption of Toronto's services unfolds quickly and efficiently. That, in turn, would help ease the bitterness remaining from the longest municipal strike in Toronto's modern history.