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A Fleeting Metropolitan Moment: Regional Governance and Municipal Collaboration in Greater Toronto during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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IMFG Papers on Municipal Finance and Governance
No. 70 • 2025

Institute on Municipal Finance and Governance
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Series editor: Lisa D. Orchard

No. 70, 2025
ISBN 978-0-7727-1162-5
ISSN 1927-1921

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IMFG is funded by the City of Toronto, the Regional Municipality of York, the Regional Municipality of Halton, the Regional Municipality of Durham, the Regional Municipality of Peel, Avana Capital Corporation, and Maytree.

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Acknowledgements

The authors wish to thank Enid Slack, Karen Chapple, Tomas Hachard, Dina Graser, and Sonali Chakraborti for their constructive feedback on previous drafts, Latonya Ludford for her early research assistance, and the mayors, city managers, and city staff consulted during the research process for their candour and encouragement.

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Abstract

During the COVID-19 pandemic, mayors and chairs from 11 of the 30 municipal governments in the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area (GTHA) met a total of 76 times to share information, coordinate emergency measures, and collectively advocate to provincial and federal governments, marking the most sustained and productive period of bottom-up, voluntary regional collaboration in the region's history.

This report documents the dawn and demise of the GTHA Mayors and Chairs group, as it was known, describing its functions and procedures, summarizing its achievements, tracking its genesis, evolution, and eventual dissolution, and offering lessons about what it takes to build effective metropolitan governance. Findings are based on interviews with nine of the participating mayors and regional chairs and five municipal chief administrative officers, numerous background interviews with the political staff and civil servants involved, and a review of primary meeting materials.

During its three-year tenure, the GTHA Mayors and Chairs group – which we also refer to as the GTHA11 – secured a range of legislative, regulatory, and financial returns that benefited the region during the COVID-19 crisis and evolved into a constructive forum for regional dialogue on a range of regional issues exacerbated by the pandemic, such as housing, policing and community safety, and refugee settlement and integration. Today, though, the group no longer meets, undone by a cascade of events, including the surprise resignation of the group's chair, Toronto Mayor John Tory, in February 2023.

All told, the story of the GTHA Mayors and Chairs is a tale of missed opportunity. The group demonstrated that informal, bottom-up regionalism is both possible and worthwhile. Local leaders across the GTHA came together and collaborated in ways rarely seen before. Had it endured, the group may have evolved from a forum for discussion and coordination to a true collaborative regional decision-making body of some kind. Today, however, with the pandemic seemingly behind us, the prospect of effective regional governance in the GTHA once again looks bleak.

Keywords: metropolitan governance, regional governance, regionalism, mayors, intergovernmental relations, COVID-19, Greater Toronto, GTHA Mayors and Chairs

JEL Codes: H11, H70, I18, R50

1. Introduction

The Greater Toronto region, often referred to as the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area, or GTHA, is the fifth largest urban region in North America, home to 7.3 million people.[1] During the COVID-19 pandemic, the GTHA became a hotspot for infections. At the height of the fifth wave, in January 2022, health officials reported more than 73,000 daily cases, resulting in a cumulative total of more than 8,000 COVID-related deaths (Government of Ontario 2022c). Outbreaks spiked not only in Toronto's dense core, but also in the inner and outer suburbs in surrounding municipalities. The geographic scale of the crisis highlighted the functional irrelevance of municipal boundaries when faced with a global pandemic and set in motion an unprecedented experiment in bottom-up, voluntary regionalism and metropolitan collaboration.

In April 2020, roughly a month after the World Health Organization officially declared COVID-19 a global pandemic, mayors and council chairs from 11 of the GTHA's 30 municipal governments — what we refer to here as the GTHA11 — began to meet regularly, often weekly, to coordinate emergency measures and public health restrictions, collaborate on economic recovery efforts, communicate with provincial and federal orders of government, and ultimately, convey confidence to the public that their governments were working closely together, and well. Known to its members as the GTHA Mayors and Chairs group, this "war cabinet," as one mayor described it to us, went on to meet a total of 76 times over the next three years, marking the most sustained and productive period of voluntary regional collaboration in the region's history.

The GTHA11 shared information, secured funding support from provincial and federal governments, and recommended legislative and regulatory changes that benefited the region. They also worked together to coordinate messaging so that residents received consistent public health information from their local leaders, ensuring that decisions made by neighbouring municipalities did not undermine one another's goals. As the COVID-19 crisis subsided with the introduction and successful deployment of vaccines in 2021, meetings continued on a biweekly or monthly basis, with discussions turning to other pressing regional issues, such as the housing crisis, policing and community safety, and Afghan and Ukrainian refugee settlement and integration. Despite these accomplishments, the group did not endure, slowed by a political lull during municipal elections in October 2022, and suspended after the surprise resignation of the group's chair, Toronto Mayor John Tory, in February 2023.

What brought the GTHA11 together? How did the group operate? What did the group ultimately achieve? And what can we learn from its demise? This report provides insight into these questions by documenting and investigating the extraordinary degree of voluntary collaboration during the COVID-19 pandemic among municipal leaders in the GTHA. Our findings are based on two rounds of in-depth interviews, conducted between May 2022 and June 2023, with 9 of the 11 participating mayors and regional chairs, five municipal chief administrative officers, and various background interviews with the political staff and civil servants involved. We also draw from primary materials (meeting agendas, minutes, and press releases) made available to us by the Toronto City Manager's Office, which served as the group's informal secretariat.

Our analysis proceeds in four parts. First, we provide a brief history of metropolitan governance in the GTHA and situate this history within the broader literature on regionalism and regional

1 Authors' calculations based on 2021 census figures for the municipalities of Toronto, Hamilton, Halton, Peel, York, and Durham. See Statistics Canada, "2021 Census of Population." https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2021/dp-pd/prof/index.cfm

cooperation. Second, we document the genesis of the GTHA Mayors and Chairs group, highlighting key actors and events, describing its functions and procedures, and summarizing its achievements. Third, we track the group's evolution until its eventual dissolution, noting where, when, and why relations began to strain, and where things stand today. Finally, we conclude by drawing lessons from the GTHA11 experience, and offer insights about the future of metropolitan governance in the Greater Toronto region.

2. Background

Economic and social life in urban areas takes place within, and is affected by, functional geographies that extend well beyond municipal boundaries. Many residents live in one local jurisdiction, but commute to work or school, or socialize with family or friends, in another; businesses sell goods and services, and employ workers, across metropolitan areas. Nevertheless, political boundaries rarely align with functional boundaries of the city-region. Very few places have formal government bodies at the city-region scale – that is, between local/municipal and state/provincial orders of government. More commonly, city-regions are instead governed by many small, competing local authorities. In theory, such political fragmentation and intermunicipal competition can produce some public benefits, such as local autonomy and responsiveness (see Tiebout 1956). However, in practice, it makes urban governance more complicated, leading to poor coordination, inefficiencies, and in extreme cases, policy failures.

Proponents of regional or metropolitan governance rooted in municipal collaboration (what scholars refer to as "regionalism") claim several advantages over municipal competition:

- *Addresses externalities.* "Free rider" problems of transportation and air pollution cannot be effectively addressed by one municipality alone (Hulst and Van Montfort 2007; Teles 2016).
- *Leverages economies of scale.* Some local services, such as water and sewer infrastructure, public transit, and emergency services, are often too expensive for one community to provide on its own. It is better to expand the service area to include more municipalities and provide the service collectively (Bel and Warner 2015; Spicer 2015).
- *Increases efficiency.* Coordination avoids duplication of services (Niaounakis and Blank 2017).
- *Enhances competitiveness and productivity.* Metropolitan areas with regional governance bodies exhibit higher economic productivity compared to fragmented regions (Ahrend et al. 2014; Lembcke et al. 2016).
- *Promotes equitable and sustainable development.* Regional land use plans can promote balanced growth and prevent urban sprawl (Bollens 2002; Moore-Cherry et al. 2022).

Many years ago, Toronto made a name for itself as a global success story in metropolitan governance. In 1953, the Government of Ontario created the Municipality of Metropolitan Toronto, a formal, two-tier system of regional government spanning the old City of Toronto and 12 neighbouring municipalities. Metro Toronto was widely praised by urban scholars and practitioners around the world for accelerating the region's construction of new water and sewage facilities, arterial roads and highways, housing and community facilities, and an integrated public transit system.

However, the benefits of formal regional government progressively diminished as suburban expansion continued spilling out over Metro's borders. Between 1960–2000, nearly 90 percent of population

growth in the region took place outside Toronto's official boundaries (Bourne 2000). Despite calls for an expanded metro governance model (see Golden 1996), Metro Toronto was eventually amalgamated into a single City of Toronto in 1998. But the surrounding two-tier local governments created by the Province of Ontario in the 1970s – known as Halton, Peel, York, and Durham Regions – which followed the Metro blueprint, were left untouched, without a substantive, overarching mechanism for wider coordination.[2] Meanwhile, the region continued to grow at an astounding rate. By 2020, Greater Toronto became the fastest-growing metropolitan area in North America, fuelled by international migration averaging 130,000 new residents per year (Moffatt and Atiq 2022).

Several regional governance mechanisms were tried in the early 2000s, mainly imposed from the top-down by the Government of Ontario. In 2004, the Province established the Greenbelt, a protected area of farmlands, forests, and green spaces surrounding the GTHA, accompanied by a regional growth management framework intended to curb urban sprawl (Taylor 2020). In 2006, it also created Metrolinx, a regional transportation planning agency, whose mandate has since expanded to operate GO Transit commuter rail services and construct all new transit lines in the region (Tremblay-Racicot 2018). Other initiatives have been led by business groups, such as the Toronto Region Board of Trade and Toronto Global's efforts to promote an Innovation Corridor, with limited success.[3]

As the most substantial informal, bottom-up, intermunicipal alliance in the history of the region, the GTHA11's unique origins, material impact, and dramatic demise make it a useful case study to understand the emergent properties of regionalism, including the conditions under which voluntary metropolitan collaboration takes root, as well as the fragile nature of informal governance arrangements.

3. Dawn of the GTHA11

The GTHA11 was born from crisis: namely, the COVID-19 emergency. The first case of COVID-19 in Toronto (and Canada) was reported on January 25, 2020; the first death attributed to COVID-19 reported less than two months later, on March 11. Within a week, on March 17, the Province of Ontario declared a public health emergency, followed by the City of Toronto and most other GTHA municipalities on March 23. The first meeting of the GTHA11 took place less than a month later, on April 21.

At the time, local public health units across the Greater Toronto region, through their chief medical officers of health, had begun sharing information to better align public health guidance with provincial directives. But most municipal politicians, their advisors, and public servants were still largely in the dark, and residents were confused, inundating municipal offices with questions and concerns. Mayors and chairs received daily briefings from public health officials about the prevalence of COVID in their municipalities, but not how the situation – the number of cases, people in hospital, people in intensive care units – compared with their neighbours, and importantly, how their neighbours were responding. So much was happening so quickly that local leaders couldn't keep up. As one mayor recalled, "We were all texting each other constantly. Eventually, I think [Toronto Mayor John Tory] just said, 'Instead of all this texting, let's get everybody together and have a talk about this.'"

2 The Greater Toronto Services Board was created by the provincial government in 1998 in the wake of Toronto's amalgamation, but possessed minimal legal authority and was dissolved shortly thereafter, in 2001.

3 See Toronto Region Board of Trade, "Canada's Innovation Corridor." https://bot.com/About/economic-blueprint-institute/Innovation-Corridor

For Tory, convening a region-wide roundtable was not out of the ordinary.[4] Prior to his time in office, Tory had served as chair of CivicAction, a local non-profit that convenes GTHA-wide policy summits every four years. And only a few months earlier, in January 2020, Tory had convened an intergovernmental "Guns and Gangs Summit" to discuss policing and public safety in the region, amid a spike in gun violence.

3.1 Membership

Starting from the list of leaders who attended the January policing summit – which included more than a dozen mayors and chairs, as well as police chiefs, Ontario's solicitor general, and federal representatives – Mayor Tory and his advisors refined the list of invitations, filtered out some municipalities (Pickering, Richmond Hill), and added others (Vaughan, Hamilton) based on three criteria:

- *Functional responsibilities.* Many public health units in the GTHA are operated by upper-tier regional municipalities; therefore the group had to include the regional chairs of Halton (Gary Carr), Peel (Nando Iannicca), York (Wayne Emerson), and Durham (John Henry).[5]
- *Population size and political clout.* As a matter of principle, the group had to include mayors from the most populous cities in the GTHA, such as Mississauga (Bonnie Crombie) and Hamilton (Fred Eisenberger). Members also had to "carry a pretty big stick," as one respondent put it to us, with close partisan or personal ties to either the provincial or federal government, such as Brampton (Patrick Brown), Vaughan (Maurizio Bevilacqua), and Markham (Frank Scarpitti).
- *Group size and interpersonal dynamics.* At the same time, the group had to be a manageable size for members to work together constructively. Based on Tory's many years of experience and personal relationships with local leaders across the region, a decision was made to add the mayor of Oshawa (Dan Carter) but leave out other mayors from similarly sized municipalities.

Ultimately, the GTHA Mayors and Chairs group comprised 11 members representing more than 5.5 million residents (Table 1; Map 1). Some mayors originally excluded from the group reached out to Mayor Tory to be added to the list. But Tory and his advisors were adamant, as one respondent put it, "not to see the group get so large that it becomes unproductive."[6]

3.2 Objectives

Between April 2020 and July 2023, the GTHA Mayors and Chairs group met a total of 76 times (Figure 1). In the early stages of the pandemic, at the height of the emergency, the group met weekly, every Monday over lunch hour, by video. Meetings served three objectives.

4 The precise origins of the idea, however, remain vague. When asked about their recollection of the first meeting, one mayor involved in the earliest discussions told us, "If you're going to ask me how it started, I honestly don't remember." Most likely, the idea emerged from informal conversations between Tory and his chief of staff, Luke Robertson, as well as Markham Mayor Frank Scarpitti and his advisors.

5 The inclusion of both lower-tier local municipalities and upper-tier regional municipalities notionally provided some members dual representation, such as Mississauga and Brampton, which both form part of Peel Region.

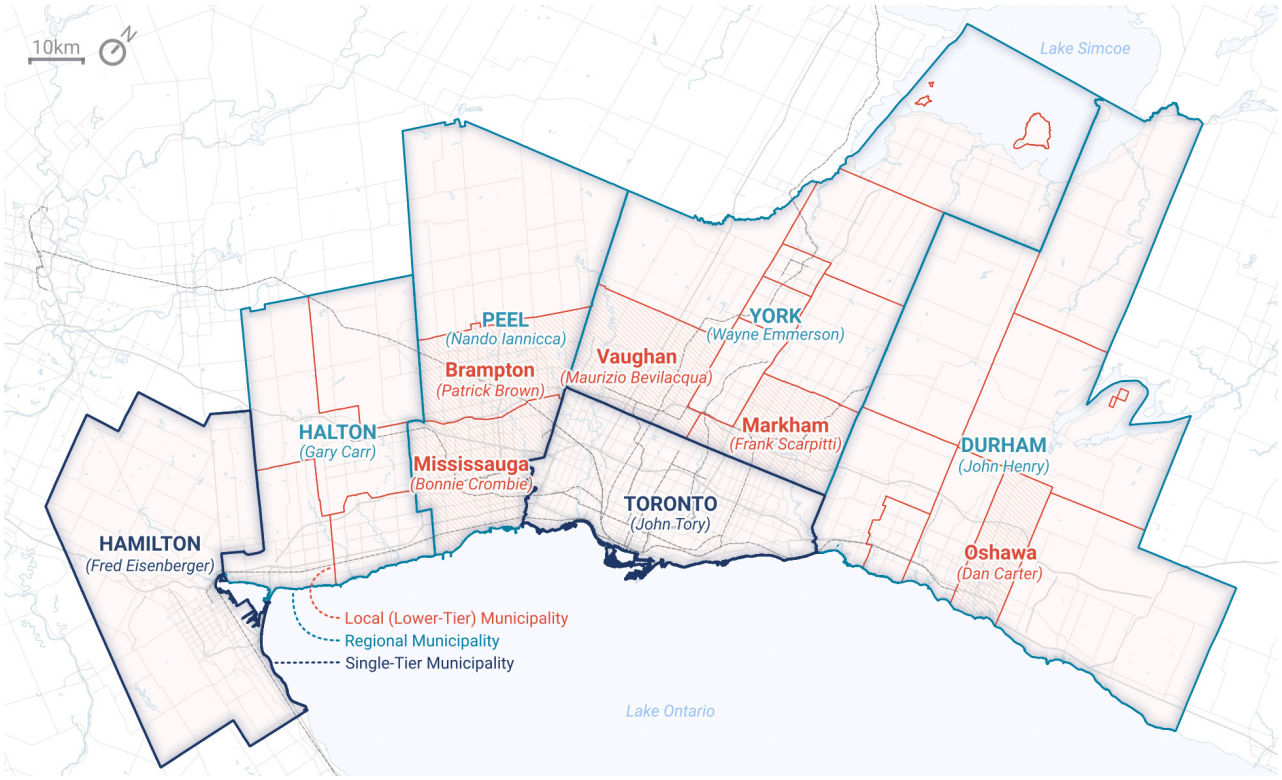
6 Eventually, Mayor Tory invited Tom Mrakas, Mayor of Aurora (pop. 55,000) and chair of the Small Urban GTHA Mayors caucus, which represents 13 neighbouring towns with populations below 100,000, to sit-in and observe, but not participate in, the group's meetings.

Table 1. Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area municipalities by population
(GTHA11 member municipalities highlighted in blue)

Municipality	Type	Regional Municipality	Mayor/Chair Member	Population (2021)
Toronto	City	-	John Tory	2,794,356
Peel	Region	-	Nando Iannicca	1,451,022
York	Region	-	Wayne Emmerson	1,184,840
Mississauga	City	Peel	Bonnie Crombie	717,961
Durham	Region	-	John Henry	703,180
Brampton	City	Peel	Patrick Brown	656,480
Halton	Region	-	Gary Carr	578,587
Hamilton	City	-	Fred Eisenberger	569,353
Markham	City	York	Frank Scarpitti	338,503
Vaughan	City	York	Maurizio Bevilacqua	323,103
Oakville	Town	Halton	-	213,759
Richmond Hill	Town	York	-	202,022
Burlington	City	Halton	-	186,948
Oshawa	City	Durham	Dan Carter	175,383
Whitby	Town	Durham	-	138,501
Milton	Town	Halton	-	132,979
Ajax	Town	Durham	-	126,666
Clarington	Municipality	Durham	-	101,427
Pickering	City	Durham	-	99,186
Newmarket	Town	York	-	87,942
Caledon	Town	Peel	-	76,581
Halton Hills	Town	Halton	-	62,951
Aurora	Town	York		62,057
Whitchurch-Stouffville	Town	York	-	49,864
Georgina	Town	York	-	47,642
East Gwillimbury	Town	York	-	34,637
King	Township	York	-	27,333
Scugog	Township	Durham	-	21,581
Uxbridge	Township	Durham	-	21,556
Brock	Township	Durham	-	12,567
			Total GTHA	**7,281,338**
			Total GTHA11	**5,575,139**

Source: Statistics Canada, 2021 Census.
Note: Population totals exclude regional municipalities to avoid double counting.

Map 1: GTHA Mayors and Chairs member municipalities



Source: Jeff Allen, School of Cities, University of Toronto.

The first priority was information sharing. "Each Monday, we would have these calls, and it would be a roundtable," explained one mayor, "and typically, it was John Tory leading us and telling us the situation in Toronto… and we would each speak about our specific circumstances." Topics included local case counts and infection rates, emergency orders and bylaw enforcement, vaccine supply and distribution, support for small businesses, outreach to vulnerable populations, and in later stages, incidence of public protests.

Meeting agendas were sent to participants in advance by Mayor Tory's office, along with relevant video links. The video format helped encourage regular attendance and participation from suburban mayors and chairs, some of whom were located in offices more than 50 km away from downtown Toronto, in Oakville, Newmarket, and Whitby. Speaking privileges were restricted to the mayors and chairs; however, several dozen political advisors and public servants regularly listened in. One chief administrator officer (CAO) who attended nearly every call, described the meetings as "magic," helping to disseminate important information to all levels of the public service.

The mayors and chairs' meetings coincided with a parallel series of regional CAO meetings convened by Toronto City Manager Chris Murray, which eventually became known as the GTHA Prosperity and Recovery Table. This CAO table, initiated before the COVID-19 emergency, aligned with calls for greater regional collaboration from academics (see Côté, Eidelman, and Fenn 2020) and the business community, particularly the Toronto Region Board of Trade. Whereas the mayors and chairs were focused on the pandemic, the CAO table concentrated on service delivery and administrative coordination in transit, housing, broadband and digital infrastructure, procurement, and long-term fiscal sustainability. Although there was no direct overlap between political and administrative tables – the two followed separate agendas – several CAOs noted that political consensus achieved at the GTHA11 helped spur collaboration and information sharing among the CAOs.

Second, the Mayors and Chairs group served as a "two-way communication vehicle" with provincial and federal governments. One mayor recalled:

> With the circumstances that we were dealing with, we had to rise to the occasion. We really did. You know, people were dying. The stress on the medical system. The anxiety. The confusion out there… We're kind of looking over our shoulder and there's nobody else there. So we'd better do this.

Several members of the group had long-standing relationships with, and therefore direct access to, provincial and federal cabinet ministers, and even the premier and prime minister, through personal or partisan ties. But the extent of the crisis meant that normal lines of communication were no longer effective. Provincial and federal officials were being inundated with calls for help from all directions. The group recognized that to be properly heard, they would need to speak with one voice and deliver a common message upward to provincial and federal counterparts.

Collegiality, rather than combativeness, was key to the group's relations with other orders of government, a reflection of Mayor Tory's quiet diplomatic style. The tone and tenor of meetings were described by nearly all respondents as collegial and constructive, especially in year one. "Everybody's voice was respected," noted one mayor from one of the smaller municipalities, "I never felt intimidated, or that my voice wouldn't be heard." Mayor Tory was always "very magnanimous" as chair of the group, noted another mayor, never ending a meeting without ensuring that all viewpoints were taken into consideration. Each meeting ended with a press release, without exception, to signal to the public that local governments were working collaboratively, and to signal their common priorities to other governments. Mayor Tory would distribute the release in advance of every meeting; then the group would revise and approve a final text for distribution.

On more than one occasion, members had to resist the temptation to publicly criticize or shame their peers, the premier, or the prime minister. Grievances were to be discussed internally within the group, and then communicated privately to relevant audiences as a collective position, principally by Mayor Tory but also through other backchannels. As one mayor described, the thinking went, "Let's not make media events out of these things. Let's work in the background, and with the right people. Do it respectfully so that we're not creating battlegrounds on these issues." Added another: "We actively set out to ensure that our messaging was, if not exactly the same, very similar and supportive of what the federal and provincial governments were doing."

Third, the GTHA11 served as a form of group therapy. Multiple respondents told us that the group gave them the chance to deal with the emotional toll of the pandemic among peers. Especially at the peak of the crisis, "people went into it to try and learn something," explained one mayor, "and at the same time, it was almost like, 'you scared too?'" Solidarity extended beyond political advocacy; it became personal. As one mayor recalled:

> We were doing our best to demonstrate a sense of confidence, that the government is working and functioning, and functioning well. But in the background, some of us are going, "Holy cow, how are we going to manage this?" So it was great therapy, a great opportunity to know that we're all in it together. And to hear that directly from the other mayors and chairs was very, very therapeutic and helpful.

In short, the GTHA11 helped form a collective consciousness, sparked by a common crisis, but reinforced by shared personal experience. One respondent summed it up as "part therapy, part strategy."

Figure 1: Timeline of GTHA11 meetings and notable events, 2020–2023

Source: Compiled by authors.

3.3 Issues and accomplishments

The Government of Ontario imposed some of the most stringent COVID-19 restrictions in North America, including several province-wide shutdowns, stay-at-home orders, and school and commercial closures (Breton et al. 2021). By sharing information, debating policy responses, drafting collective statements, and advocating to federal and provincial officials, the GTHA11 were able to secure a range of legislative, regulatory, and financial returns that specifically benefited the region.

Public health measures and economic recovery. In June 2020, as the first wave of COVID-19 crested, the mayors and chairs helped convince the Province to institute a regional reopening framework (Ontario 2020a). Malls, libraries, community centres, and a limited number of other businesses and services would reopen to the public in most of the province, but not within the GTHA. Later the same month, at the urging of their local medical officers of health, the group agreed to pursue a region-wide mask mandate that required face coverings in all indoor public spaces, including on public transit, in libraries, malls and retail stores, places of worship, shelters, and congregate care settings – three months before the provincial government introduced a similar, province-wide mandate (GTHA Mayors and Chairs 2020a; Ontario 2020b).[7]

In early 2021, mayors and chairs worked together on vaccination planning, the rollout of mass vaccination clinics, and outreach to underserved and marginalized communities. When vaccine supply lagged, the group lobbied the Province to provide more equitable vaccine access to COVID hot spots, such as Brampton, with large populations of essential workers and high case counts (GTHA Mayors and Chairs 2021a; 2021b). Pressure from the group, as well as public health experts, convinced the Province to modify its vaccine distribution plans on two separate occasions to allocate additional vaccine shipments by postal code, rather than per capita, which specifically benefited Toronto, Halton, Peel, and York regions (Ontario 2021a; 2021c).

Financial support. COVID-19 placed enormous strain on municipal budgets. Local governments deferred tax collections and fine repayments, offered business relief programs, and maintained transit service despite massive declines in ridership and fare revenues. In 2020 alone, Brampton reported a $75 million (8%) drop in revenues, Hamilton forecast an $87 million (9%) annual operating deficit, Mississauga anticipated a $107 million (11%) budget gap, and Toronto projected a staggering $1.3 billion (10%) shortfall (Brampton 2020; Hamilton 2020; Mississauga 2020; Toronto 2020a).

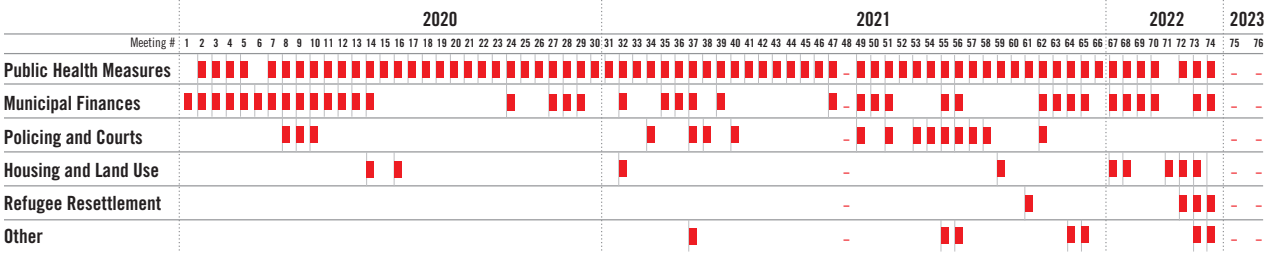
The mayors and chairs used their forum to collectively direct staff to calculate COVID-related revenue and expenditure impacts across the region, and used the data to publicly lobby for financial help from provincial and federal governments (GTHA Mayors and Chairs 2020c). Within two months, the group met with then Ontario Ministers of Finance and Municipal Affairs, Rod Phillips and Steve Clark, to raise their concerns, and privately made direct appeals to GTHA-area Members of Parliament (MPs) and Members of Provincial Parliament (MPPs), including Premier Ford (MPP for Toronto riding Etobicoke North) and Deputy Prime Minister Chrystia Freeland (MP for Toronto Centre). Ultimately, the mayors and chairs helped secure $2 billion in federal and provincial funding in summer 2020, through the federal-provincial Safe Restart Agreement, as well as an extra $2 billion to cover transit revenue shortfalls (Ontario 2020c).[8] A further $500 million in provincial funding was offered to municipalities in March 2021, most of it earmarked for GTHA municipalities (Ontario 2021b).

As the pandemic subsided, in the latter half of 2021 into 2022, the frequency of meetings shifted from weekly to biweekly, and eventually monthly, gatherings. Mayors and chairs continued to discuss public health closures, vaccination rollouts, and economic recovery and reopening plans, as well as related financial challenges. But gradually, other pressing regional concerns, beyond those directly related to COVID-19, made it onto the group's agenda (Figure 2).

7 The group was less successful in convincing the Province to maintain the mask mandate into spring/summer 2022. Ontario withdrew mandatory masking in March 2022.

8 Although federal transit funds were not explicitly earmarked for the GTHA, they disproportionately benefited municipalities in the province's largest urban region, as funds were allocated according to per capita, COVID case count, and ridership-based criteria.

Figure 2: Issues discussed at GTHA Mayors and Chairs meetings



Source: Compiled from GTHA Mayors and Chairs meeting summaries and minutes.
Note: Minutes not available for meetings 48 (May 3, 2021), 75 (Jan. 23, 2023), and 76 (July 18, 2023).

Policing and court backlogs. In response to protests sparked by the death of George Floyd in the United States in May 2020, and the broader Black Lives Matter movement, the mayors and chairs agreed to begin a dialogue with the provincial government about policing reform. Ontario Attorney General Doug Downey and Solicitor General Sylvia Jones met privately with the group in July 2020 to discuss various reform proposals, including greater transparency and accountability mechanisms for Special Investigations Units, and the creation of community crisis response teams to respond to mental health calls. Notably, the meeting with provincial ministers was never publicized (see GTHA Mayors and Chairs 2020b), which was consistent with the group's preference to treat meetings as a confidential forum to discuss controversial topics. Other politically sensitive proposals noted in meeting summaries, but not in public releases, included municipal handgun bans (February 22, 2021).

Mayors and chairs also raised concerns about the backlog of court cases created by pandemic shutdowns. Municipal governments in Ontario are responsible for the administration of local courtrooms where many non-criminal provincial offences are heard, including traffic offences, liquor license violations, and other regulatory matters covered by municipal by-laws. Provincially mandated court closures led to severe delays in prosecutions and appeals, and therefore fine collections. The group gathered GTHA-wide data on the financial impacts of COVID-related closures and convened a second meeting with Attorney General Doug Downey in July 2021 to advocate for the full resumption of court services (GTHA Mayors and Chairs 2021c).

Housing and land use planning. At various points during the pandemic, mayors and chairs discussed COVID-19's housing-related impacts. In August 2020, the group agreed to collect data on residential evictions. In January 2021, it discussed potential shortcomings of new federal investments in supportive housing. And in August 2021, the group discussed spikes in homelessness and emergency shelter capacity.

By winter 2022, the housing crisis, to some degree, superseded COVID as a top priority for all levels of government. The Ford government convened a Housing Affordability Task Force and introduced new planning legislation, the *More Homes for Everyone Act*, to speed up housing approvals. In response, the GTHA11 came together in January 2022 to discuss collective housing priorities in preparation for an Ontario-Municipal Housing Summit. The following month, it scheduled a dedicated meeting to formulate a collective response to the provincial Housing Affordability Task Force report.

Refugee resettlement. After the withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan in August 2021, the mayors and chairs discussed preparations for the expected arrival of up to 10,000 refugees to the region. A Toronto Region Afghan Resettlement Fund was established by the City of Toronto, in partnership with United Way Greater Toronto and LifeLine Afghanistan, to coordinate private sponsorships and distribute financial assistance to newcomers (Toronto 2021).

Similarly, after war broke out in Ukraine, in February 2022, the mayors and chairs discussed a coordinated response. Within weeks, Mayor Tory presented a region-wide resettlement plan to the federal and provincial governments, referred to as the GTHA Ukraine Response partnership, to provide temporary accommodation for up to 1,200 Ukrainians, distributed evenly across the region (GTHA Mayors and Chairs 2022). Almost 2,000 Ukrainian refugees eventually arrived in the region, but not commensurate funding from federal and provincial governments (Alhmidi 2023). Within a year, hundreds of refugees and asylum seekers, from Ukraine and elsewhere, were living in emergency shelters across the GTHA. Several municipalities, including Hamilton and York Region, were forced to wind down their settlement programs due to lack of funding (MacMillan 2023). The group made a final plea for additional federal support following its final meeting, in July 2023, to no avail (GTHA Mayors and Chairs 2023).

3.4 Impact

Overall, the GTHA Mayors and Chairs group believed they exerted genuine political influence. In the words of one respondent, "There was no question that we were listened to very carefully." Members expressed confidence that federal and provincial leaders regarded the group as an effective channel for intergovernmental dialogue, especially during the most acute stages of the COVID-19 crisis. "When it got to the point where we were at odds on a policy or a direction, we had the opportunity to talk it through with the premier, with the prime minister," explained another respondent, "and I think that had a pretty strong impact on how they proceeded on some of their decisions."

Three factors help explain the group's political clout. First, the 11 mayors and chairs collectively represented more than 40 percent of the Ontario population and 58 of Ontario's 104 electoral districts, including dozens of vote-rich "905" ridings around Toronto that often decide federal and provincial elections. Basic electoral math therefore ensured there was always an audience for the group's concerns. (One mayor put it more bluntly: "Politically, it's a nice package, right?") Second, with few exceptions, the group spoke with a single, united voice. Rather than stake out positions, mayors and chairs found common purpose. Messaging was consistent and focused on the region as whole, not the needs of individual municipalities. This helped to amplify shared challenges and priorities, making it easier for provincial and federal officials to consider the group's proposals. Third, the group deliberately refrained from publicly criticizing other governments. Instead, mayors worked quietly behind the scenes, raising concerns in private, never through the media. As one mayor put it, "We don't whine, we don't cry." Public statements were almost universally positive and constructive, praising federal and provincial governments while encouraging them to take action for the common good.[9] The goal was to signal not only to key decision makers, but also to local constituents, that the group was focused on solutions, not sound bites.

This combination of electoral importance, group solidarity, and quiet diplomacy helped the group achieve several collective objectives. Still, the group also experienced various setbacks. Earlier in the pandemic, members had trouble convincing the provincial government to mandate employers to provide paid sick days for workers who tested positive for COVID-19 (GTHA Mayors and Chairs 2021a). Premier Ford relented in April 2021, but only on a limited and temporary basis (Ontario 2021c). The group was also unable to persuade provincial officials to extend the mask mandate through the summer of 2022. More than one respondent recalled tense discussions with former

9 Plain text versions of 70 public statements and media releases issued by the GTHA11 between April 2020 and July 2023 are accessible and permanently archived at the following link: https://doi.org/10.5683/SP3/8JEMY9

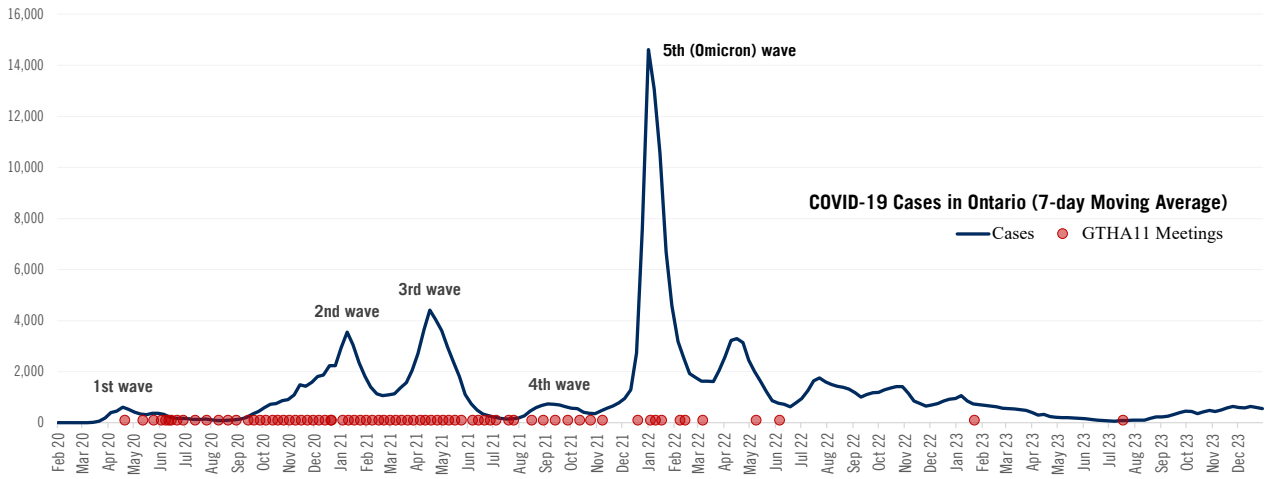
federal Minister of Public Safety Bill Blair, regarding guns and gang violence, which led nowhere. Others lamented a lack of federal engagement on mental health and addictions response.

3.5 Summary

The birth of the GTHA11 marked a break from historical precedent. Local leaders had long preferred to compete with one another – for jobs, for investment, for attention – rather than engage in meaningful collaboration. The magnitude of the COVID-19 emergency, however, reset the political calculus. "It made everybody come into [the] room and say, 'How do we deal with this common foe?'" recalled one respondent. "That commonality of purpose has never been higher in my life. It's almost like a war effort."

For the first time in decades, mayors and chairs across the region saw value in learning from and working with their neighbours. The "tribalism" that previously complicated regional dialogue, as one respondent put it, "faded away." Mutual trust and confidence grew as the leaders shared their experiences with their peers. A new, durable foundation for regional cooperation was seemingly emerging, rooted in group solidarity and an understated tactical approach to intergovernmental relations. As pandemic pressures eased, the group even began to evolve into a productive forum for regional dialogue and advocacy on issues beyond COVID. But a cascade of events upended the group's progress and returned regional governance to square one.

Figure 3: COVID-19 waves in Ontario



Source: Compiled by authors from Government of Canada (2024, April 16) COVID-19 epidemiology update: Current situation. Various reports. https://health-infobase.canada.ca/covid-19/current-situation.html

4. Demise of the GTHA11

Between April 2020 and July 2021, during the first three waves of the pandemic (Figure 3), the mayors and chairs met regularly, a total of 58 times, or nearly once per week. Starting in August 2021, however, the group dropped to biweekly, then monthly, meetings – save for a brief period in January 2022, at the height of the fifth wave, when the group met for three consecutive weeks. By summer 2022, the group was no longer meeting on a regular basis. Only two meetings have been held since – one in January 2023; another in July 2023, six months later. For all intents and purposes, the group is now dormant, if not dead.

What happened? Why did the group "fizzle out," in the words of one respondent, and ultimately "implode," in the words of another? How did a group considered by its members as "very effective" and a "huge success," which worked together productively for more than two years through a once-in-a-generation crisis, wither away so easily? Why was this moment in the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area's metropolitan history so fleeting? We offer four explanations.

4.1 The emergency ended

First, and most obviously, the urgency of the COVID-19 pandemic subsided. Toronto lifted its state of emergency on May 9, 2022; neighbouring municipalities followed soon after. No doubt exhausted and eager to return to "normal" political life, mayors and chairs (and their political advisors) turned their attention to other priorities, including upcoming elections. On June 6, 2022, members agreed to suspend further meetings until after municipal elections on October 24, 2022, signalling the unofficial start of the election campaign. The group did not meet again for another seven months.

4.2 The Province changed course

Second, soon after securing a second majority government in June 2022, the Ford government introduced a series of major legislative and regulatory changes affecting local governments across the province. On August 10, 2022, the government announced that "strong mayor" powers would be extended to Toronto and Ottawa through the *Strong Mayors, Building Homes Faster Act*, which provided mayors the ability to veto matters that did not align with provincial priorities. On October 25, 2022, the day after municipal elections were complete, the government presented the *More Homes Built Faster Act,* which brought in sweeping changes to the provincial planning framework, including a new development charge regime, without any municipal input (Ontario 2022a). Three weeks later, on November 16, the government tabled the *Better Municipal Governance Act,* which further defined provincial priorities and strong mayor powers. The same day, the government also announced it would conduct a formal review of two-tier, regional governments in Durham, York, Halton, and Peel, thus posing an existential threat to every GTHA municipality except Toronto and Hamilton (Ontario 2022b).[10] Strong mayor powers were later extended to big city mayors across Ontario, including GTHA11 mayors in Brampton, Mississauga, Hamilton, Vaughan, Markham, and Oshawa, in July 2023 (Ontario 2023c).

The group's months-long election hiatus left it flatfooted and unprepared to respond to such dramatic municipal reforms. Mayor Tory attempted to reconvene the group a few weeks after local elections, in mid-November, but available records suggest the meeting never took place. Some mayors and chairs were still being sworn into office and municipal processes were required to immediately adapt to legislative changes at the start of new council terms. Instead, municipal advocacy efforts shifted to more established intergovernmental forums, namely the Ontario's Big City Mayors (OBCM) caucus, which represents 29 mayors from across the province. The OBCM released a series of media statements, even presenting a formal deputation to a provincial parliamentary committee (see OBCM 2022a; 2022b). Over time, the GTHA11's standing at Queen's Park diminished, while the OBCM's grew such that in June 2023, Premier Ford personally hosted a meeting with OBCM mayors over lunch at his mother's house in the Toronto suburb of Etobicoke.

10 The government eventually approved the dissolution of Peel Region in May 2023 (Ontario 2023a), but backtracked only months later. It first referred the governance review to a parliamentary committee in September 2023 (Ontario MMAH 2023) and then abandoned plans entirely in December 2023 (Benzie 2023).

4.3 Internal tensions emerged

Third, the "huge amount of trust" built among the GTHA Mayors and Chairs during the early stages of the pandemic, as described to us, started to dissolve. Partisan and interpersonal tensions began to expose cracks in the group. Nine of the 11 GTHA Mayors and Chairs were either re-elected or re-appointed to office after the municipal elections. The two exceptions, Mayors Fred Eisenberger (Hamilton) and Maurizio Bevilacqua (Vaughan), chose to retire. Their replacements, Andrea Horwath and Steven Del Duca, had just left roles as recently defeated leaders of the Ontario New Democratic Party and Ontario Liberal Party, respectively. This meant that, counting Mayors John Tory and Patrick Brown (Brampton), who both have long-standing ties to the Ontario Progressive Conservative Party, the GTHA11 included four former leaders of three different political parties. Circumstances became even more uncomfortable a few months later, when Mississauga Mayor Bonnie Crombie – who, at the time, was also serving as chair of the OBCM – ran for, and eventually won, the leadership of the Ontario Liberal Party, stepping into Mayor Del Duca's old role.

Of greater concern, leaks began to surface. Certain members reported that they could no longer speak their mind, that the group "stopped being a safe place." As one mayor put it:

> There was a breach of confidentiality. Numerous times. And there was a feeling that there were leaks. And whatever was said wouldn't be held in trust. And it was being repeated back to the premier almost verbatim… Suddenly, we felt that whatever we were saying was going to be used against us as a political tool or weaponized for someone else's political agenda.

Others dismissed this sentiment, insisting that Mayor Tory's political experience and skill ensured confidentiality. "There was at least one time," recalled one mayor, "where I remember [Mayor Tory] called one [member] directly and said, 'I'm told you called the premier and said this. You can't do that.' And it didn't happen again." Respondents also noted that Tory (and his staff) would pre-empt potential leaks by proactively communicating the group's concerns to the Province immediately after each meeting. As one respondent explained:

> We had a pretty good routine going where anything we were going to say publicly out of that group, the Province knew about it in advance… [So] there was no point in going behind anyone's back… no point in leaking to the Province, because they already [knew].

Perhaps not. But clearly, some members of the group no longer felt comfortable having frank conversations.

4.4 Mayor Tory resigned

Fourth and finally, the GTHA11 unraveled because of a political bombshell: the sudden resignation of Mayor Tory on February 10, 2023, after he admitted to an inappropriate relationship with a member of his staff. The news came as a complete shock to the mayors and chairs, and paralyzed the group. "It all dropped dead with him [Tory]," recalled one member. "It just stopped," added another. "It really was that kind of – boom! – moment."

In Tory's absence, the group floundered. "John Tory had a desire to do this, a genuine desire to do this, and also had the cachet and the appeal to pull his colleagues in," explained one respondent. No one was willing or able to step up and fill the leadership vacuum. As one mayor put it, "There wasn't one [person] that all of us could point to and go, 'Yeah, that's the person [to take charge]."'

Tory's deputy mayor, Councillor Jennifer McKelvie, who filled in as acting mayor until a by-election could be held, had neither the personal relationships nor the inclination to lead the group. Mississauga Mayor Bonnie Crombie, as noted earlier, had provincial leadership ambitions in mind. Similarly, Brampton Mayor Patrick Brown had his sights set on becoming leader of the federal Conservative Party. Other members felt they lacked the necessary clout, profile, staff resources, or legitimacy to take the reins.

A few mayors and chairs expressed cautious optimism that Tory's successor, Olivia Chow, could be persuaded to reconvene the group. Most, however, expressed doubt that Mayor Chow could fill Tory's shoes, or more to the point, that she had any interest in regional cooperation. These fears were soon validated. Days before taking office in July 2023, Chow publicly criticized the federal government for "not paying a cent" to the city to help the housing shortage for refugees (Hasham 2023) – a fiery advocacy strategy at odds with the group's understated, diplomatic approach under Mayor Tory. The signal to the rest of the mayors and chairs was clear: everyone for themselves. In response, both Mississauga Mayor Bonnie Crombie and Peel Region Chair Nando Iannicca released open letters of their own requesting federal funds for refugee resettlement (Gibson 2023).

In a last-ditch effort to revive the group and confront the refugee crisis as a regional problem, Durham Chair John Henry reconvened the mayors and chairs on July 18, 2023 – the first and only meeting called and chaired by someone other than Mayor Tory. However, the meeting achieved little. Available records suggest Mayor Chow did not attend – she was sworn into office just days earlier – and despite exchanging updates on local circumstances and releasing a joint statement, the group's pleas went largely unnoticed (GTHA Mayors and Chairs 2023). Meanwhile, Chow doubled down on her unilateral approach, negotiating an exclusive "new deal" for Toronto with Premier Ford, while "playing hardball" with Deputy Prime Minister Chrystia Freeland for more federal funding (Gurney 2024; Ontario 2023b).

4.5 Summary

The elements that brought the GTHA mayors and chairs together in the first place have all but disappeared. COVID-19 was the clear catalyst, motivating members to share information, advocate collectively, and find common purpose. When the emergency ended, politics returned to "normal." Mayors and chairs turned their attention back to municipal politics, and the provincial government back to municipal reform. Old hang-ups and suspicions re-emerged, and group camaraderie crumbled.

The group held together, at least nominally, during the lead-up to municipal elections, but momentum was already waning. Mayor Tory's sudden resignation just months into the new electoral term was the final "nail in the coffin." COVID had fallen off the political agenda, replaced by other crises – housing and homelessness, mental health and opioids, refugee resettlement, and municipal restructuring – all loaded with long-standing ideological and intergovernmental impediments that prevented the mayors and chairs from speaking with one voice.

The GTHA11 "was an extraordinary group at an extraordinary time, led by an extraordinary leader," reflected one mayor. But extraordinary circumstances cannot last forever, a fact the group never seemed to contemplate. "Sometimes you get complacent because it's always there," continued the same mayor. "It just didn't occur to us ever that [it would all end]." But it did end, and as another mayor concluded, "I don't know that we'll ever have the elements to bring [the group] back together anytime soon."

5. Lessons

What does the GTHA11's brief but noteworthy history teach us about what it takes to build effective metropolitan governance in the Greater Toronto region? We offer several lessons, anchored and contextualized within the scholarly literature on intermunicipal cooperation, intergovernmental relations, and institutional collective action.

Crisis can spark regionalism, but cannot sustain it. The GTHA11's genesis during the crucible of a global pandemic makes it exceptional, in one sense, yet consistent with theories of social and political change. Crisis has long been recognized as a catalyst for change, when the impossible becomes possible (Tarrow 1993). These "moments of madness" (Zolberg 1972, 206) make possible radical disruptions of everyday routines and attitudes, and thus often precipitate profound changes in metropolitan governance arrangements (Nelles 2013; Snow et al. 1998).

However, a crisis can also reset politics back to the status quo. Just as a sudden, unexpected shock gave birth to the GTHA11, extraordinary events of a different kind contributed to its death. The provincial government's decision to introduce sweeping changes to municipal legislation, in one case the day after the municipal election, clearly blindsided the group, as did Mayor Tory's resignation, which caught members completely off guard.

The combination of these external shocks proved too difficult to overcome, partly because the group had never discussed its own future. Despite the fact that meeting agendas had broadened over time to include a range of policy problems beyond the pandemic, most members still considered the group a COVID-specific forum – there if necessary, but not fundamental to their political agendas. As one respondent put it, using a sports analogy, the mayors were like hockey players "so focused on the ice," on immediate concerns, that they "didn't realize there needs to be planning down the way." To extend the analogy further, the team had a respected coach who guided them to several victories against the odds, but not a general manager thinking ahead to next season.

The group made no effort to take stock of its past achievements, or to take a step forward and institutionalize a deeper form of regional collaboration. This process could have begun by simply drafting a basic mission statement. In our first round of interviews, only one mayor raised this, noting, "the fundamental objective of the group has to be, as we evolve, to… agree on a mission statement." The group could have invited industry, civil society, and academic leaders to participate in broader dialogues about the needs of the region, or considered establishing complementary sectoral tables to advise the group. And as discussed below, it could have taken more seriously the idea of establishing a permanent secretariat, which the group discussed only once and summarily dismissed.

Regionalism requires not just one, but many champions. Crisis does not create change on its own; as the origin story of the GTHA11 exemplifies, a strong leader(s) must leverage the opportunity presented by a crisis. "The realities on the ground, the crisis situation, that was the foundation," noted one respondent, "But it still took that extra level of leadership to make sure everyone is at the table, and happy… to be at the table."

Toronto Mayor John Tory was universally regarded as the group's convenor, principal spokesperson, and *de facto* leader – a role known in the literature on intermunicipal and regional collaboration as a civic entrepreneur.[11] Civic entrepreneurs engage in a form of collaborative leadership that brings people together and builds networks in a world of distributed power structures. According to Henton

11 While civic entrepreneurs are often public actors, bureaucratic or managerial entrepreneurs (city managers and chief administrative officers, and other senior municipal officials) are equally well positioned to drive interlocal cooperation (Côté, Eidelman and Fenn 2020; Nelles and Wolfe 2022). Business leaders can also play this role, most typically in bringing together diverse communities in regional governance coalitions.

et al. (1997, 31), civic entrepreneurs reinforce a sense of shared identity and community vision by "creating opportunities for people to work together on specific projects to advance their economic community."

All our respondents expressed respect for Tory's personal leadership style and political experience, which made him well suited for the role. Fostering regional collaboration requires a high degree of political acuity, as well as emotional intelligence. Local leaders across the GTHA differ widely in public profile and political power, and represent constituencies with equally diverse interests and identities, which often leads to fractious personal and professional relations. Tory consistently demonstrated an ability to champion solidarity and defuse political conflict.

In hindsight, though, it is equally apparent that the mayors and chairs relied too heavily on Mayor Tory to shepherd the group, steer its agenda, and ensure its long-term viability and influence. One mayor admitted that they would have been interested in leading a meeting, but the lack of staff capacity to "handle the back end of things" was "probably the one thing that held me back." The day-to-day functioning of the GTHA11 was almost entirely dependent on Mayor Tory and his staff – an overdependence that left the group particularly vulnerable after his shock resignation so soon after being re-elected to a third term, and undermined its ability to adapt.

Most respondents agreed that only Mayor Tory's replacement, Olivia Chow, could conceivably reconvene the group. Due to its size and clout, the mayors and chairs expect Toronto to take the initiative. But once in motion, other members could certainly take on a greater leadership role. This could include instituting a rotating chair, establishing working groups or committees, or designating deputy positions to spread leadership responsibilities across a larger subset of members.

Empowering individual voices strengthens solidarity, but dilutes collective identity. Miller and Nelles' (2019) survey of regional intergovernmental organizations in the United States notes various mechanisms that local leaders use to ensure group solidarity. One is to make sure that individual members, not the partnership, own victories. Although counterintuitive, minimizing the collective profile of the partnership can actually strengthen member buy-in. When collaboration yields benefits, individual participants should be able to return to their local constituencies and say, "I did this," and reap the political rewards.

The GTHA Mayors and Chairs group delivered several collective benefits for the region, such as coordinated public health restrictions and financial assistance from federal and provincial governments. Yet the group was notably self-effacing in its public communications. Communiqués were deliberately worded to indicate that the messages came from the mayors and chairs. A typical press release would begin "Today, Mayors and Chairs from the 11 largest municipal governments across the GTHA held their regular weekly meeting to discuss the ongoing response to COVID-19 across the region" (GTHA Mayors and Chairs 2021b). This framed the activity as a meeting of independent leaders, not a formal organization. Instead, individual mayors would often issue follow-up statements claiming personal credit for successful advocacy positions.[12]

12 For example, in April 2021, the Government of Ontario increased vaccine supply to COVID hotspots, such as Brampton, in part due to pressure from the GTHA Mayors and Chairs. Following the announcement, the group issued a generic statement in which the mayors "welcome[d] additional vaccine doses for hot spot areas," without mentioning Brampton by name (GTHA Mayors and Chairs 2021d). Brampton Mayor Patrick Brown then followed up with his own statement, on Twitter (now X), in which he claimed credit.
Brown, Patrick [@patrickbrownont]. (2021, April 29). *I want to thank @fordnation & @celliottability on the announcement that #Brampton residents 18+ will be eligible for #COVID19Vaccines starting May 3rd. This is exactly what we have been pleading for.* [Post] X. https://x.com/patrickbrownont/status/1387837130882363394.

This approach had advantages. For one, every member felt a part of the initiative, their individual voice heard. Public statements were prepared by Mayor Tory's office but vetted and amended by everyone by consensus. As one mayor put it, "I think the reason that it worked was because everybody felt they were all equal and that everybody had their say." Added another mayor from a smaller municipality, "Everybody's voice was respected. And everything was taken under consideration. At no time did I feel like I did not belong in that conversation." Empowering every member to speak their mind, in turn, helped the group speak with one voice.

Speaking with one voice, though, is not the same as being heard as one. Beyond perfunctory press releases, which garnered minimal news coverage, the group had little to no public profile. From time to time, a few mayors (typically, Tory, Crombie, Brown, or Scarpitti) would post a screenshot of the group's video call or press release to their individual Twitter feeds, but nothing more. No website was created with a record of the group's statements; no joint press conferences were ever organized.

By not calling greater attention to its collective achievements, the GTHA11 missed an opportunity to construct a public identity rooted in a shared vision for the region, thereby inadvertently diminishing its political relevance. As pandemic pressures waned, municipal politics returned to "business-as-usual." Individual election campaigns (and in the case of Mayors Brown and Crombie, party leadership campaigns) rose to the top of members' political agendas while regional concerns withered. The provincial government took note, redirecting intergovernmental discussions to other political venues, such as the Ontario Big City Mayors caucus.

Trust can be cultivated, but must constantly be reinforced. Trust is crucial to regional cooperation, built not only by personal relationships, but also expectations of reciprocity and norms of behaviour (Nelles and Wolfe 2022). Early on, the GTHA11 was characterized by unprecedented levels of trust, based on the strength of Mayor Tory's personal relationships and leadership style, and members' common experience as leaders in a time of crisis. "It was pretty amazing to watch unfold," recalled one CAO who regularly attended meetings, "because it's nothing like I've seen before."

Several respondents described meetings as a form of "therapy" and catharsis, as a reassuring community that helped mayors and chairs deal with the emotional burden and anxieties that come with leadership in turbulent, scary, and uncertain times. As one mayor put it, "Our ability to talk about it, I think, gave [members] a comfort level and a [sense of] solidarity that was important at that junction."

In our first round of interviews, respondents regularly described how safe they felt raising concerns with their peers, that the GTHA11 was a trusted, confidential space to discuss controversial issues.[13] In the words of one mayor:

> We had conversations in those meetings that were spirited, but respectful; that were honest and that were emotional because we could speak to things in confidentiality. And we knew the group trusted. And we knew the group that was there could actually express how they actually felt without any danger of it leaking out. And I think that that played a significant role.

A year later, sentiments changed. Some respondents raised concerns about past leaks, which undermined their confidence in the group, leading them to self-censor at future meetings. For others, any leak was a minor blunder with no lasting impact. Whatever the case, the leak itself was likely more damaging to group solidarity than any specific information shared with the Premier's Office.

13 This sense of confidentiality is particularly remarkable given that meetings were typically attended (virtually) by dozens of senior staff and civil servants from member municipalities.

Trust is fragile. When norms erode, members may choose to disengage, or worse, resort to competitive, rather than collaborative, behaviour. It is thus important to consistently reinforce trust with action. The GTHA11 could have drafted a formal code of conduct for members to follow or contemplated a more severe enforcement mechanism to protect confidentiality. The principle was strongly implied, but rarely addressed explicitly, thereby weakening compliance. Additionally, the group could have considered restricting access to a smaller group of senior officials from member municipalities, especially in the later stages of the pandemic, when the urgency of sharing information with lower-level staff had diminished.

Informality may help in the short term, but not in the long term. The mayors and chairs we interviewed, particularly early on, unanimously endorsed the GTHA11's informal structure. Some contrasted their experience with more formal advocacy groups, such as the Ontario Big City Mayors or Canadian Big City Mayors caucuses, which they described as unwieldy. As one mayor put it, "there's always political baggage" in those forums, which makes consensus difficult.[14]

This sentiment is consistent with the Institutional Collective Action framework, which stresses that partnerships such as intermunicipal cooperation are a function of participants' perceptions of collaboration risks and transaction costs (Feiock 2004). The GTHA11 presented a relatively low-cost, low-risk forum for intergovernmental coordination with potentially high rewards. The group's primary objective was to share information, rather than financial resources, thus avoiding high transaction costs. Virtual meetings drove down transaction costs even further by eliminating travel and reducing time commitments.[15] Participation was as simple as logging on, and the technology enabled key advisors (e.g. CAOs and other senior civil servants) to attend as needed. This made buy-in cheap and easy to secure.

However, the literature on regionalism reminds us that informality is also a liability. David Hamilton (2014, 249) argues that voluntary intergovernmental efforts only "give the illusion that something is being done in order to address regional problems to prevent any more powerful or drastic regional governmental reorganization." Similarly, Taylor (2020, 42), commenting specifically on the Canadian context, argues that "at best, [informal arrangements] are transitional stages toward the development of compulsory bodies with specific mandates." More often than not, they tend to collapse without greater formalization.

The GTHA11 remained an informal initiative from beginning to end. Meetings were organized by Mayor Tory's scheduling assistant on an ad hoc basis, and media releases drafted by his communications director. His chief of staff managed communications with provincial and federal officials, mainly through unofficial channels, while only a single staff member from Toronto's City Manager's Office was assigned to take basic notes and keep records. No other political staff or public servants from member municipalities were assigned to provide formal administrative support. Moreover, there was no coordination with the Greater Toronto Area Prosperity and Recovery Table, made up of regional CAOs.[16]

14 The Ontario Big City Mayors group represents the 29 largest municipalities across Ontario. Some, like Thunder Bay and Windsor, are located more than 1,200 km apart. Not surprisingly, local priorities in these cities thus differ widely; even more so among members of the nation-wide Big City Mayors Caucus.

15 For some mayors and chairs, attending in-person meetings would have meant nearly five hours of travel and meeting time, round trip – during a public health emergency, no less.

16 Like the GTHA11, the Greater Toronto Area Prosperity and Recovery Table no longer meets, due mainly to member turnover, including the retirement of former Toronto City Manager Chris Murray, who originally spearheaded the group's creation.

Upon reflection, several mayors and chairs acknowledged that the group's informal structure and minimal administrative capacity undermined its long-term sustainability. "I'm a member of a number of groups," reflected one mayor, "and I can tell you, the groups that rely on people to do it off the side of their desk don't often survive. You can chair the group, but you need an executive director, a coordinator of some kind."

At one point, in May 2022, the group was approached by CivicAction, a prominent, GTHA-wide civil society organization, to serve as a formal, independent secretariat. But the mayors and chairs rejected the offer, wary of contributing money or staff resources to an outside organization. Mayor Tory, who had past ties to CivicAction, did not press his colleagues on the issue, mindful to avoid any perceived conflict. In hindsight, this was a mistake.

The international literature on intergovernmental councils (albeit at national and subnational levels) indicates that greater formalization, such as set meeting schedules, a clearly defined mandate, and a permanent secretariat, has been found "to improve cooperation, to increase trust among governments, to enhance the predictability of intergovernmental interactions, to overcome compliance problems, to facilitate conflict resolution, and to promote accountability" (Schnabel 2020, 7). Moreover, the more institutionalized an intergovernmental council, the more likely it is to influence its members to develop common interests and "deviate from their individual interests" (Bolleyer 2009, 25).

In this light, the informality that defined the GTHA11's work almost certainly contributed to its demise. The group was over-reliant on Tory's own political staff to handle its back end, administrative affairs. This left the group vulnerable to political change and competing interests. After Tory's resignation, the group had no other institutional infrastructure to fall back on, and thus floundered. A dedicated secretariat with staff resources drawn from multiple municipalities could have better prepared the group to withstand unforeseen events, like Tory's resignation, and ensured greater continuity and group cohesion through the election period.

6. Conclusion

Notwithstanding its eventual demise, the GTHA11 marks an important chapter in Greater Toronto's political history. For decades, since the creation of Metro Toronto in 1954 to its dissolution in 1998, to more recent regional transportation and land use planning efforts in the early 2000s, metropolitan governance in the Toronto region has been led from the top-down, by the provincial government. Despite many good reasons to work across local boundaries, the purported benefits of regionalism have rarely generated enough political momentum to bring together local leaders to solve problems collectively. That changed during the COVID-19 crisis, when a new model of bottom-up regional governance emerged, led by municipal mayors and chairs.

What gave the GTHA11 life? The COVID crisis, no doubt, but not only that. Mayor Tory's leadership inspired trust, encouraging open dialogue and candid conversation. Members felt their voices were heard and respected, especially early on, which strengthened feelings of solidarity. Regular meetings built momentum, and easy access via videoconferencing technology maintained engagement. Crucially, the group delivered results, demonstrating to members – and the public – that when mayors and chairs work together in pursuit of common interests, in the words of one respondent, "they really can move the needle."

However, when the COVID-19 emergency eventually diminished, so too did group cohesion and common cause. In retrospect, the GTHA11 relied too heavily on Mayor Tory's leadership to instill and

sustain a shared commitment to collective problem solving – what Iveson and Eidelman (2023) call the "metropolitan mindset" – a sentiment that vanished the moment he resigned. The group either ignored or rejected proposals to formalize its work, for instance, by staffing a permanent secretariat or aligning its work with parallel regional meetings of municipal administrators, which would have built institutional resilience. The provincial government's aggressive legislative reforms weakened the group's regional responsiveness even further.

The story of the GTHA Mayors and Chairs is a tale of short-term success and missed opportunity. The group proved that informal, bottom-up regionalism is both possible and worthwhile. Local leaders across the GTHA came together and collaborated in ways rarely seen before. Had it endured, the GTHA11 may have evolved from a forum for discussion and coordination to a true regional decision-making body of some kind. Today, though, with the pandemic seemingly behind us and other conditions that gave rise to the GTHA11 altered, the prospect of effective regional governance in the GTHA once again looks bleak.

Are we back at square one? When asked what it would take to reconvene the GTHA11, some respondents suggested that only another large-scale crisis could possibly catalyze collaboration. "With how well we've performed during COVID," remarked one mayor, "that should give you the impetus to continue." But many long-standing problems now talked about as crises, such as housing unaffordability, homelessness, or the opioid epidemic, lack the same degree of urgency and common purposes as the COVID-19 pandemic, having been debated for years without consensus solutions.

Some respondents pointed to Mayor Tory's successor, Olivia Chow, as the deciding factor: "I don't think any of us are going to pick up the phone and say, 'Olivia, would you consider running it back?' I think it would have to be her. Because it was John Tory that called me and said, 'Would you come?'" Were that to happen, continued the same mayor, "I would be shocked" if the idea didn't receive unanimous support. Others, though, were more pessimistic, either because they felt the moment had somehow passed, or because they no longer saw as much value in meeting as a group, post-COVID.

As long as lines of communication remain open, the door to regionalism is never completely closed. "You've got to keep on talking," insisted one mayor. "Because once you stop talking, that's where things go bad. In hostage negotiation, what do they want to do? They want to keep you talking... That's how we have to address it." So the region waits for a leader to break the silence.

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ISSN 1927-1921

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