



Friday » January  
9 » 2009

## Alderman fears fallout over home assessments

### Notices being released Friday by the city

**Kim Guttormson**

Calgary Herald

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Calgarians will find out Friday how much the city says their homes are worth, a number that could resuscitate the anger that boiled over during recent budget talks.

The annual assessments, as always, are based on July 1 data--a period of higher prices, before this fall's tumble.

Whether a homeowner's property taxes go up or down depends on their assessment in relation to the overall city average--if everyone's house value is dropping, only those whose decline is less than the average would see increased taxes.

But given this year's turmoil, the city is bracing for fallout.

"The economic climate is making everything more intense," Ald. Gord Lowe said, adding that concern over assessment numbers surfaces every year.

But this year the sharp economic decline over the past few months and a bitter budget battle over the tax increase have focused the public's attention.

"We get a bunch of worried calls every year. I'm sure we'll get them again this year, particularly with the market down," Ald. Ric McIver said. "The system is not well understood.

"This year will probably be slightly worse than other years."

An open house in November drew angry crowds looking to vent and demanding no tax hike, given other pressures homeowners were worried about facing.

During almost 50 hours of submissions and debate, council split, with some arguing they had to keep up with the demands of a growing city or risk falling behind, while others wanted a tax increase tied to the rate of inflation.

At the end of the discussions, next year's tax increase was set at 5.3 per cent, down from the proposed 9.6 per cent.

"The public's anger hasn't died down," McIver said. "I hear from people every day. People haven't forgotten yet."

Even though the tax increase has been set, battle lines were drawn, personal shots were taken, and some on council believe there will be lasting repercussions over their term's remaining two years.

Lowe, chairman of the finance committee and a staunch defender of the budget, said it will take longer to get things done.

"Personal agendas get in the way," he added.

Ald. Diane Colley-Urquhart, one of a group of aldermen who fought the budget process and the budget itself, said there is a deep philosophical divide on council.

"Those tensions will continue to become magnified," she said. "People don't change their philosophies about these things."

Mayor Dave Bronconnier said the debate over the budget was a healthy one.

"We had overwhelming civic engagement, people wanted to talk about the budget, they wanted to find out what were the numbers, why did we have to have an increase," he said. "City council did its job. It went through the budget, it spent many, many hours looking for potential savings.

"At the end of the day, Calgary will still be in the enviable position, the lowest overall residential property taxes (of major Canadian cities.)"

He said whatever bad blood may have trickled out of the budget debate, council needs to move beyond it.

"You win debates, you lose debates," he said. "When a decision is made, you move on.

"When you look at personalities on council, from time to time they flare up, but it should be focused around the issue that is there.

"Because council must do what's the best for the citizens of Calgary. That means on to the next issue."

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