



Alderman rallies tax fighters

Colley-Urquhart looks for support to halt 25% increase

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Calgary Herald

Saturday, November 08, 2008

Like-minded aldermen are banding together in hopes of presenting a united front in their battle against the city's proposed three-year budget and its 25 per cent tax increase.

"It will be one of those defining moments in city budgeting," Ald. Diane Colley-Urquhart said of the 9.6, 6.8 and 6.9 per cent increases that, compounded, total 25.1 per cent.

She hopes to gather at least five other aldermen next week to go through the budget line by line.

"We have to have a co-ordinated approach to this," she said. "It's more effective if we work together."

Ald. Ric McIver said if they're to have any chance of making changes to the budget, which calls for spending \$7.9 billion over three years, "we need eight votes."

"It's tough to collaborate on the fly," he said of the budget debate. "So it won't hurt if we put our heads together a little bit."

On Thursday, the city unveiled the biggest tax hikes to face Calgarians in a quarter century. Under the proposed property tax plan, residents with an average home assessed at \$430,000 would be paying \$537 more in compounded payments by 2011.

On top of that, homeowners also face higher fees for water, garbage, sewage and recycling in 2009, tallying more than \$200.

The proposed increases have Calgarians fuming, leading homeowners Friday to flood the offices of aldermen and the mayor with calls and e-mails.

At the receiving end of that anger, aldermen are girding for a budget tussle when council begins debating the numbers on Nov. 17.

Along with aldermen McIver, Andre Chabot, Joe Connelly, Ray Jones and Jim Stevenson, Colley-Urquhart hopes to pull in Dale Hodges and John Mar to vote down the controversial tax hike.

Stevenson said he's happy to talk with the others, but more as an opportunity to learn what they're dealing with than as a block vote.

"I'll be part of any group that wants to see some way to lessen the burden," Stevenson said.

Others agree it's too early to know where the debate will lead, having only received

the full budget books Thursday.

Mar -- acknowledging he is often viewed as a swing vote -- hasn't made a decision on whether to support the proposals.

"What we need to do is work together as a council to try and ensure what we're doing is in the best interest of the city given the new economic reality we are in," Mar said.

Similarly, Ald. Bob Hawkesworth said it's too early to weigh in on any specifics of the budget -- or where he stands on it.

But the early feedback he's received suggests residents want council to preserve select services.

"People don't like the increase in taxes, but I'm hearing they don't want council to touch road maintenance, fire and policing," he said.

Jones said the budget doesn't sit well with him because it misses some obvious places to cut spending.

"One area that always bugs me is communications -- I've always thought it higher than it should be. And information technology is a bottomless pit we always seem to sink money into," he said.

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