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Aldermen balk at adding staff as economy sinks 'We definitely have to add less people'

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The city plans to add 1,400 employees to its payroll -- a major expenditure in a budget that could see homeowners face a compounded 25 per cent tax increase over the next three years.

More than half of the new employees will be added next year.

Three-quarters of the positions will be used to increase the ranks of police, firefighters, paramedics, as well as staff for transit, roads, waste and recycling and the water department -- but critics say the numbers merit a closer look.

"That has to be trimmed," Ald. Ric McIver says of the number of new hires being considered. "I don't know who or what or how, but we definitely have to add less people."

Dan Kelly, with the Canadian Federation of Independent Business, points out that when the private sector hits tough economic times, it stops hiring, and the city needs to do the same.

"The City of Calgary operates completely divorced from any economic reality that faces citizens or business in the city," he says. Freezing hiring "would seem a very obvious step."

As Calgary boomed over the past few years -- adding more than 182,000 people since 2000 -- it increased its staff to meet the demands of residents. Mayor Dave Bronconnier has said the city could see another 70,000 Calgarians in the next three years.

From 2000, the number of city employees has climbed by 3,300. By next year, 14,558 people could be on the payroll.

Much of the increase is attributed to police, fire and EMS personnel, as well as transit, with service needing to be stretched to the edges of the city.

"It costs money for those services," Bronconnier says.

Over the past three years, when Calgary was growing rapidly, council stuck to its set tax increases.

Now, says Ald. Gord Lowe, chairman of the finance committee, it has to deal with the pent-up demand for service.

"(The increases) address front-line service," Lowe said when releasing the budget. "There are exactly no wants addressed in this; in fact, we haven't met all of the needs identified by Calgarians."

"What we have responded to is what Calgarians have told us they want."

That includes adding over the three years 242 more police officers, 130 firefighters, 55 paramedics, 30 emergency dispatchers and an additional 290,000 hours of transit service.

Ald. Diane Colley-Urquhart says she's heard the argument of maintaining quality of life -- but in spite of big spending, surveys show citizen satisfaction is still declining.

"We're spending and spending and adding on and there's an erosion of these things," Colley-Urquhart says.

In the years to come, people may still move to the city, but just as many may choose to move away as the economy slows.

Ald. Jim Stevenson says the city's in a tough spot because when you build much-needed fire, police or EMS stations, you must put staff in them -- and those areas, plus transit, are important to people.

Earlier this year, fire Chief Bruce Burrell warned that the city could require up to 22 more stations over the next decade if it continues to grow.

Police Chief Rick Hanson has been making the case for 400 additional officers over the next three years as his department combats increasing gang violence and social disorder.

"After protective services and transportation, there may be some areas we can do something about," Stevenson says. "After those, the pencils need to be really sharp."

Ald. Joe Connelly points out that as Calgary's growth slows, the city may need fewer employees.

"The economy is contracting and the City of Calgary is expanding? Two market forces are going against each other," he says. "We need to ensure the (new employees) are needed and needed in the long-term."

At the same time over the past few years, with a labour market weighted in favour of employees, the city struggled to both keep the staff it had and bring in new employees.

The city overall lost 10 per cent of its staff last year, and while that number is expected to drop over the next few years, for many departments job losses will still hover near the double digits -- about nine per cent for transportation, as much as 11.5 per cent in transit.

And the city is also just beginning to negotiate new contracts with most of its largest unions. Council has approved a labour strategy that sets out wage increase parameters. Salaries and benefits total about 56 per cent of the budget.

McIver says the city has a responsibility to those it's hired. But the question he wants answered is how many more it hires.

"It's not what we pay people," he says. "In some cases, it's the work we decide to do."

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Proposed City Staff Increases

Overall, including utilities:

- 2009 -- 871

- 2010 -- 155

- 2011 -- 388

Total = 1,414 for 15,102 employees by 2011

Asset management and capital works, including corporate properties and buildings and infrastructure services:

- 2009 -- 42

- 2010 -- 3

- 2011 -- 6

Total = 51 for 712 employees by 2011

Community services and protective services, including fire, EMS, 911. Recreation loses staff:

- 2009 -- 127

- 2010 -- 38

- 2011 -- 101

Total = 266 for 3,756 employees by 2011

Corporate services, including finance, information technology and human resources:

- 2009 -- 121

- 2010 -- 13

- 2011 -- 4

Total = 138 for 1,343 by 2011

Planning, development and assessment:

- 2009 -- 31

- 2010 -- 2

- 2011 -- 6

Total = 39 for 809 employees by 2011

Transportation, including roads and transit:

- 2009 -- 189

- 2010 -- 2

- 2011 -- 155

Total = 346 for 3,824 employees by 2011

Utilities and environmental protection, including waste and recycling and water and sewer:

- 2009 -- 239

- 2010 -- 31

- 2011 -- 48

Total = 318 for 1,884 employees by 2011

Calgary Police Service

- 2009 -- 110

- 2010 -- 67

- 2011 -- 65

Total = 242 for 2,521 employees by 2011

Corporate administration, including city clerks:

- 2009 -- 12

- 2010 -- 0

- 2011 -- 2

Total = 14 for 190 employees by 2011

Source: City of Calgary budget

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