

## 23%. Property tax bills may rise \$262 by 2011

Kim Guttormson and Joel Kom, with files from Jamie Komarnicki, Calgary Herald  
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Outrage and disbelief greeted news Thursday that homeowners are facing a 23.3 per cent property tax hike over the next three years, adding \$262 to the average bill by 2011.

In the highest spikes since the early 1980s, the city is proposing a tax increase of 9.6 per cent next year, 6.8 per cent in 2010 and 6.9 per cent in 2011.

Higher fees for water and sewer, recycling and waste disposal will also add about \$236 to the averaged metered home in three years.

"That's devastating," said Stan Nykiel, with the Coalition of Seniors Advocates. "How does the city have the gall and the audacity to bring these kinds of increases forward?"

Michael Gretton, who works in the non-profit sector, said in light of the troubling economic times, his family is re-evaluating its budget and so should the city.

"Like everybody else, our family will look at what we bring in per month and what we spend in a month and we'll be sharpening our pencils," Gretton said. "City council has to ask what are (citizens') priorities and see if it's something we'll be able to swallow.

"Whatever the increase, think about it."

The city is planning to increase its 2008 spending of \$2.3 billion by about \$200 million next year -- a more than 50 per cent increase since 2004, when the operating budget was \$1.6 billion.

It will spend another \$154 million by 2010 and an additional \$160 million in 2011.

The budget will be politically contentious, with a number of aldermen vowing to search out ways to bring the number down. However, many of the big-ticket items have already been approved by council -- most in near unanimous votes -- including \$25 million for 200 new police officers and setting out potential wage increases over the next three years, since negotiations with most civic unions are already underway.

Ald. Diane Colley-Urquhart doesn't like the process.

"To lock us into a budget that's already been 90 per cent approved is really unconscionable to me," she said. "There's no desire down here at City Hall to be lean and mean."



CREDIT: Ted Rhodes, Calgary Herald  
Michael Gretton, shown with wife Nannette and eight-year-old daughter Elsa

Mayor Dave Bronconnier said the majority of the new spending is being funnelled into three areas -- emergency services, transportation and protecting the environment.

That will include 242 additional police officers, 130 new firefighters, 55 paramedics and 290,000 more hours of transit.

"We are very mindful of the changing economic uncertainty and what impact that has for Calgarians," Bronconnier said. "But we're also mindful over the next three years this community is going to grow by 70,000 people. And if you want to see a city that's going to spiral down, you don't invest in it.

"We invest in infrastructure for the long term, build for today and tomorrow, being sympathetic to ensure we remain the lowest major city for property tax, bar none."

Ald. Gord Lowe will steer the budget through debate the week of Nov. 17, where aldermen will try to chip away at the tax hike. With police, fire, EMS and transit getting the bulk of the money, he said, that's where major cuts would have to be made to achieve significant savings.

Colley-Urquhart said that's a false threat.

"I think it's fearmongering when you say we're going to have to cut front-line service," she said.

"To show a total arrogant disregard for the citizens of this city at this period of uncertainty is one of the biggest surprises in my public life."

And critics argue that with the abrupt change in the economy in the past two months, using numbers that made sense even as recently as summer is out of line.

"In an environment where properties are being sold for less than last year's value and people just lost 25 to 40 per cent of their investments and income . . . the rest of the world, everyday Calgarians, are looking very hard at their expenditures," Geoff Pradella, vice-president of public and government affairs for the Calgary Chamber of Commerce, said. "We think they need, in view of the tough decisions everyone else is making right now, to look at putting things off until better times."

Scott Hennig, with the Canadian Taxpayers Federation, believes there is room to make cuts and council will have to find them.

"Families are already tightening their belts and they expect governments to do the same," he said.

Bronconnier said he understands what homeowners are experiencing.

"I think most Calgarians are like me, nobody wants to pay any more taxes. And I don't think there's a member of city council that wants to levy them," he said. "However, city council is well versed in the challenges we face, the growing demand for services.

"I believe most Calgarians . . . (would) say, 'You know, if we're going to pay more, investment in environmental protection, police officers, firefighters, emergency medical services, transit and roads are probably a pretty good place to start.' "

Gretton said he understands why his taxes are necessary, and even that there must be an increase.

But he wants to be reassured that the mayor and aldermen will make sustainable

decisions for both the city and the taxpayers.

"Some of us, our salaries are not going up. We're paying more in property tax, we have to cut our budgets here and there," he said. "I think it's really important these days to strive for balance.

"They have to make sure any increases are in check with Calgarians' ability to pay for those increases."

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### What You're Paying

Annual impact of proposed tax increase\*

2009 2010 2011

9.6% 6.8% 6.9%

\$81 \$63 \$69

\$99 \$78 \$84

\$117 \$90 \$99

\* Residential municipal property tax

Source: City of Calgary

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### What You're Getting

Additional resources under the proposal:

#### Community safety

- 242 new police positions
- 130 firefighters, four new halls
- 55 paramedics, three 24-hour ambulances, one 12-hour ambulance
- 16 bylaw officers
- 30 more 911 dispatchers
- 30 transit peace officers

#### Transportation

- 290,000 added hours of transit service
- Continued low-income transit pass
- 32 more maintenance staff
- Increased taxi fares for Access Calgary
- Increased road maintenance

Environmental protection

- Curbside recycling to 300,000 households
- Waste and recycling services to 20,000 new homes
- Added funding to cover regulatory, landfill permit standards
- Maintenance of 400 added hectares of parkland
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Online

Have Your Say: Tell us what you think of the city's plan to raise taxes 23 per cent over the next three years.

Watch a video of Mayor Dave Bronconnier defending the budget increase.

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