

While looking for cuts, Calgary Council decides to spend more to clean up graffiti

BY JASON MARKUSOFF, CALGARY HERALD NOVEMBER 23, 2009



About 40 people sit and watch inside Calgary City Hall council chambers, listening to city council debate the west leg LRT project. A coalition will issue a report card on the council Monday.

Photograph by: Dean Bicknell, Calgary Herald

CALGARY - Ald. Ric McIver is trying to swing the budget axe, but council has twice so far refused his bids to demand millions in cuts without knowing how they'd affect civic services.

The southeast alderman proposed that the city's corporate services department find another \$2.8 million in cost savings, on top of the trims its managers already made to help keep next year's tax increase at 4.8 per cent.

With the division's general manager saying it was unclear how public communication, building management or other services would be affected by such a broad-based cut, Ald. Bob Hawkesworth said it was wise "not to shoot in the dark" — to cut without knowing how it would affect Calgarians.

McIver, a rumoured 2010 mayor contender, said that administration would know better than council where savings could be found.

"We need to give management a chance to manage," he said.

The bid lost, narrowly. An earlier proposal to cut grants to civic partners like the zoo, library system and Tourism Calgary won only the support of Ald. Andre Chabot and himself. That pitch was modelled after Ald. Diane Colley-Urquhart's attempt to reduce funding to those agencies but leave the libraries alone.

Council did approve a more modest cost saving proposed by Chabot. He suggested a \$200,000 spending reduction found by not hiring as many new human-resources staff as anticipated next year.

Mclver has stepped away from his call to get the tax increase as low as zero — which colleagues called ridiculous — but told reporters Monday afternoon he'll demand all city departments cut their budgets further.

To offset a \$44-million revenue shortfall and keep the property-tax hike low, city administration has already scaled back each department's 2010 spending by 1.7 per cent. That has triggered job cuts in areas like seasonal park maintenance and transit drivers, as well as reduced schedules for some suburban bus routes.

Mclver said that officials haven't dug deep enough, especially given that city-hall employees have submitted hundreds of cost-saving suggestions that don't seem to have gotten much consideration.

"There's more to get, and we're not doing our jobs well enough unless we keep asking until we get what there is to get," he said.

His goal is to bring the tax hike closer to three per cent, he said.

The earlier votes suggest that few colleagues have the appetite to support him. Colley-Urquhart has signalled that a top priority for any cost savings she finds would be to devote that money to extra transit security.

Additional budget cuts would likely mean Calgarians would see less program service, the city's chief financial officer Eric Sawyer has warned.

When a reporter noted to Mclver that the proposed 4.8-per-cent tax increase amounts to \$4.50 or one Starbucks latte a month, the Ward 12 aldermen fired back: "Let's give that four bucks back to the taxpayer. It's their latte, not ours."

Council will use money from Calgary's reserve fund to provide \$350,000 to scrub graffiti from private residences and businesses, aldermen decided during the first day of 2010 budget deliberations.

Ald. John Mar mentioned the recent anti-Semitic graffiti in southwest Calgary to bolster his argument that the city should play a role in cleaning up vandalism, to show victims "that they are not alone in his fight."

However, Mar had been pushing for more money into the cleanup subsidy program.

"It's not adequate," he said in an interview. "But is it better than nothing? Absolutely."

Because city officials were late in hiring a graffiti-removal contractor for the project this year, they could

carry over \$150,000 from the \$250,000 pilot project to next year's program. Aldermen voted to pull the balance of the funding — \$200,000 — from the city's fiscal stability reserve.

That decision means Mar's graffiti program won't add to the property-tax increase for next year, currently pegged at 4.8 per cent. It also signals Calgary council's willingness to dip into the \$128-million rainy-day fund, ahead of Mayor Dave Bronconnier's request to use it for better snow removal and McIver's to help save Race City speedway.

Council is already being asked to pull \$13 million from the reserve to offset investment and other losses and to balance the city's books.

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