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The market meltdown pushes some on council to take a deep breath before rubber stamping projects ... At this rate, Silly Hall could lose its nickname

By [RICK BELL](#)

Yes, extra, extra read all about it.

I feel like a hawker of newspapers in the old black-and-white movies, shouting what's up because there's something out of the ordinary to report. It shouldn't be extraordinary, but it is. Such is the state of things.

Money goes out, rarely is there talk of money coming back in.

But, here we are, talking to Sharon Purvis, who looks after the municipal real estate.

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One new chunk of cash in Sharon's world is \$1.7 million to put in a fitness facility in the big blue playpen, a place where politicians make you realize the geeks on high school student council weren't so bad after all, a strange site officially known as the Municipal Building.

Yes folks, that's \$1.7 million from the budget just approved by all but four aldermen. You know this year's budget, with the 19.2% tax hike over three years and all kinds of spending, some of it far less important than having a little better snow clearing. Got money for public toilets, you got money for a few more graders.

Anyway, the interview is most interesting. Oh, Sharon goes through the usual whys and wherefores of the Silly Hall gym and this columnist feels another outrage cooking on the stove.

She tells me they will talk to city employees later this year about what they would like at the gym. The city will consult with their recreation experts to find what would be a good layout and they will take a peek at what other office buildings are doing in the downtown.

Sharon points out all kinds of reasons for the gym.

It will be handy for employees. They won't have to compete with other people in crowded facilities in the downtown. With a gym close by, more people will likely work up a sweat. Workers will be healthier and take fewer sick days, file fewer compensation claims and be more productive.

A fitness facility will help recruit employees and keep them.

"Senior management has been looking at it for a number of years," says Sharon.

That's not exactly a plus.

But then the tune changes and it is a welcome change.

First, Sharon says she remains strongly committed to this gym but they haven't figured out a whole lot yet. There are no design doodlings on paper. This is a case of trying to fit a gym into an existing building. She compares it to contemplating a big renovation.

When asked for a date the digs will be up and running, Sharon mentions the economy, the big downturn in dollars the mayor and his minions pretend doesn't exist.

She says city management will be "making decisions along the line" about this \$1.7 million.

There is time to say no or stop for now. In the early part of this year, a lot of the cash isn't being spent.

"The funding is here now but I can't predict what's going to happen in the future," says the poobah of city property.

"We don't operate in a vacuum. We are very mindful and very respectful of the economic situation. It will depend on council's decisions going forward."

Sharon's comments fit well into what some members of city council are saying.

Instead of just rubber-stamping the budget when it is finalized in April, the numbers should be adjusted in light of what's going on in the real world.

The feds are doing it, as is Premier Ed. Surely Silly Hall can lose its nickname when faced with the fallout from the biggest story on the globe.

As previously stated on this page, Ald. Diane Colley-Urquhart is pushing for a touch of realism downtown.

"Full marks to Sharon. It's nice to see some indication middle management is starting to get it. We know the front-line workers get it. Hopefully it won't be too late to see some decent recommendations for cuts from city manager Owen Tobert and company," says the alderman better known as Big Red.

"Now he's been given a \$28,000 bonus for his performance, maybe that will spur him on. He says he'll monitor the situation and his finger is on the pulse. Well, the heartbeat is getting faint and we've got to do something. The system is in shock."

Diane should know. She's a nurse.

We expect a fight next week over the 5.5% pay hikes council scored.

We'll get some debate on improving a snow clearing effort more appropriate for Miami than Midnapore. Could there be questions on the economy? Cross your fingers we won't have to

hear and more about a plastic bag ban that's not happening.

"There is no ban. But when it comes back six months down the road, this thing could grow legs," warns anti-ban Ald. Gord Lowe. I knew it was too good to be true.

Now is not the time for rude reality. One reader demands this page produce one Pollyanna day, where we take a moment to think good thoughts of those in power.

Done. Don't know about you, but I've got a vehicle to haul out of the soup.