

Wednesday » January
21 » 2009

Aldermen debate disclosure of details on office expenses

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An alderman will ask her colleagues to look at automatically releasing more details about their office expenses, a day after \$1.7 million in spending was revealed on the city's website.

Other aldermen said they were satisfied with a policy that allows the use of public money to cover educational courses for aldermen and their assistants.

"It's the next iteration of transparency," Ald. Diane Colley-Urquhart said of providing more detailed explanations of office expenses, rather than a total for each category, such as travel, seminars and business. "The devil's in the details."

Scott Hennig, with the Canadian Taxpayers Federation, said while the city should be commended for posting the amounts, the ultimate goal should include receipts and a breakdown of the money spent.

Ald. Gord Lowe believes the current system gives people enough information to judge how well their aldermen manage their money.

"But if someone wants to go further, I have nothing to hide," he said. "As far as I'm concerned, you can have all the detail you want."

Each quarter, the amount spent from each aldermanic office budget is posted online. Last year, their budget for staff salaries and other costs was \$145,385. Council decreased it during last fall's budget debate so that the 2009 limit is \$139,192.

In 2008, Ald. Linda Fox-Mellway spent the biggest chunk of her budget, although no alderman went over his limit.

Part of that was on a \$15,000 course that Fox-Mellway said will take over six months and believes will give her tools to better probe city reports.

The course, which she takes on week-ends and also counts company presidents and vice-presidents as students, covers areas such as managing risk, financial management, directing extreme events and providing strategic guidance.

"In any job, if there's something you can do that increases your performance . . . you do it," she said. "It's appropriate to the job that I do."

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