



Tuesday » January
27 » 2009

Council keeping pay hike, parking increase

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Calgary Herald

Tuesday, January 27, 2009

Faced with mounting public outrage over increases to parking rates and their own salaries, city council refused Monday to revisit either of the contentious issues.

Attempts to roll back both hikes--a 25 per cent jump in hourly on-street parking rates and the 5.5 per cent salary boost --were sold as prudent ideas in light of the shaky economy and its potential effect on put-upon taxpayers. However, neither garnered enough votes to even merit discussion.

"It's disappointing and discouraging that you can never get enough votes to do things that are going to send the message that we get it," said Ald. Diane Colley-Urquhart, who wanted to freeze salaries at 2008 levels.

"It just shows it's business as usual at city hall. We're not changing anything at all, it's still full bore ahead."

To debate the proposed salary increase, council needed to revisit a 2006 decision to set its wage hikes using Statistics Canada data.

That lost on a tie 7-7 vote, with Ald. Dale Hodges absent due to illness.

Some aldermen expressed frustration at revisiting old decisions. Ald. Brian Pincott said council is being stalled by some chasing the issues of the day.

"Council is in great danger of constantly just chasing its own tail and not actually doing what is right for Calgary," he said. "Sometimes, yes, we can and should revisit issues. But I think we need to be very considered about that, as opposed to, 'What's the new issue this week we should be responding to?'"

Mayor Dave Bronconnier also chastised aldermen wanting to reopen debates.

"You're certainly seeing some reactionary moves rather than a proactive type approach," he said. "How many decisions would you wish to go back and keep revisiting as a reaction to news stories?"

However, the mayor did vote to revisit the salary increase, which is tied to Statistics Canada's average salary increase for Albertans, as recommended by an independent committee two years ago.

Bronconnier said he has no issue with council wanting to review how its salary hikes are determined, though he supports the current process. However, Ald. Joe Connelly said calls to reconsider the salary increase were "grandstanding" and "policy on the fly."

"In this game, you get what you pay for. If it turns around that (aldermen's salaries) get killed in the future because the economy tanks, that's the way it goes," he said.

While the Canadian Taxpayers Federation would like to see council take a smaller raise, Alberta director Scott Hennig said the principle of allowing the rate to be set by a mechanism other than the whim of council is what's important.

"It's really tempting to say cut the salary but, ultimately, we fundamentally believe politicians should have absolutely no say in how much they get paid," Hennig said.

If the rate is tied to Alberta salary averages, council has to live and die by that. While this year's increase is based on the average between September 2007 and September 2008, next year's is likely to be minimal, if not negative, given the economy, Hennig said.

Ald. Andre Chabot, who wanted council to consider cutting the increase in half, said this is an extraordinary year.

"In light of the current economic times, we have to think outside the box," he said. "It's kind of an anomaly this year. I think taking a reduction in what was proposed by an independent committee in this particular instance would have been in the best interest of Calgarians."

Calgarian Debbie Andrew agreed and called the pay increases a "slap in the face" to families trying to make ends meet in an economic downturn.

"They should have waited until we were out of a recession," she said. "People are trying to put food on the table for their kids and prices for everything keep going up. Not a lot of people out there are getting raises right now."

Her husband, Peter Andrew, who is self-employed, said everyone should be entitled to a cost-of-living raise.

"I'm just glad the mayor pays taxes, too," he said.

Meanwhile, council refused to revisit increases to the Calgary Parking Authority instituted earlier this month, as opening the debate required the support of 10 council members.

Maggie Schofield, executive director of the Calgary Downtown Association, said she lodged a formal complaint with the mayor over rates she said will hurt downtown businesses.

"I'm disappointed it wasn't even worth considering," she said.

The hourly rate for on-street parking is now a maximum of \$5, up from \$4. Hourly spots in the priciest down-town city parkades now run \$6.50 an hour, up from \$6. The parking authority said the increases are based on rates charged at private lots.

Both issues are likely to be raised again in the near future. Chabot said he will introduce a new motion to reduce the salary increase.

He said he thinks some would agree to his suggestion of a 2.75-per-cent increase. Ald. Ric McIver said he will bring the parking rate increase back to council.

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