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Watch city waste money

By MICHAEL PLATT, CALGARY SUN

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From 100 people and \$4.5 million, to a staff of 207 and a budget in excess of \$30 million one decade later.

For this, taxpayers get "Eric Sawyer explains Calgary City Council's 2011 budget adjustments."

It's a YouTube video with just 461 views — and the footage of the city's financial boss is considered a hit.

A more typical City of Calgary effort would include "Seniors art program," which despite snazzy graphics and snappy camera work failed to attract even 90 watchers since it was posted last March.

A massive waste of time and money? That's up to city council, faced with a daunting review of city hall's tangled communications budget and spending that's seven times higher than it was ten years ago.

"These numbers are way way too high — this number of staff is ridiculous and not part of our core business."

That's the scathing opinion of Ald. Diane Colley-Urquhart after reviewing a report going to council Monday, in which communications staff attempt to justify their existence.

When city workers are wasting their time making tedious Internet videos and what amounts to propaganda for city hall, it's hard not to question the value — especially given the staggering growth of staff and budget.

Take away the essential people who answer the 311 lines at city hall and you still have 122 communicators doing a job that 74 people managed, 10 years and 200,000 citizens ago.

That's 122 people talking to the media and working to inform the public — a task that now includes making YouTube videos as well as hammering away on social media sites such as Twitter and Facebook.

But what's the value? If the role of a communications department is to provide information, it seems city hall's communicators are far too focused on questions no one is actually asking.

To look again at YouTube, city staff have now produced more than 180 flashy videos requiring time, expense and planning — all for a total audience of 21,000 people, or an average of 117 viewers per video.

A pointless exercise? Consider that a YouTube video of even mediocre mass interest should garner thousands of views. "Spider Monkeys at the Calgary Zoo," is one example, with 74,426 hits in just four months.

YouTube is easy to pick on, because the total viewership is public information — but the same must be asked of all communications currently leaving city hall, whether online, on television or in old-fashioned flyers.

A storm-water awareness campaign is touted in the report as a major achievement, but it remains a question of who wanted to know? The same goes for leaky toilets, river rafting and so forth.

It all looks suspiciously like a massive make-work project for too many people with too little real work.

Though Mayor Naheed Nenshi says he isn't overly alarmed about staffing and costs, the value of the department's work is one answer he wants. In other words, does anyone really care?

"That's exactly right, and it's one of the reasons I asked for this report," said Nenshi.

"To have effective communication, you have to have an audience that's interested in what you're talking about."

If Calgarians seem disinterested, they're definitely not happy.

Despite hoards of extra people and piles of extra cash, citizens satisfied with the information received from the city fell from 64% in 2001 to 57% last year.

Ironically, that figure comes directly from an annual report put together by the communications department, called the Citizen Satisfaction Survey.

When four in ten taxpayers are unimpressed with what their \$30 million buys, you'd think the message would be clear.

But the boss of those who communicate, Cindy Pickett, says she believes the city is doing a good job of balancing traditional information sources with modern social media.

She says it's a good value for Calgarians.

"Absolutely it is — the demand for information has increased over the past ten years and the number of communication channels as well," said Pickett, director of communications.

"People expect us to communicate through Twitter, Facebook and YouTube, but others expect the traditional channels — you have to keep up with both."

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