

# Stage set for police budget battle

## Spending plan put in without \$5.1M in cuts

BY JASON MARKUSOFF, CALGARY HERALD NOVEMBER 9, 2011

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A budget showdown between Calgary police and council will begin today, because the police commission submitted a spending plan without \$5.1 million in 2012 reductions that city managers had wanted, Ald. Diane Colley-Urquhart said Tuesday.

As the city releases its three-year draft budget with a five per cent hike in property tax next year - and slightly higher in 2013 and 2014 - the bold move stands to add pressure for service or spending cuts in other departments.

The tax hike levels that council ordered meant all departments had to trim their budget plans.

In a break with the trend his predecessor Dave Bronconnier had set, Mayor Naheed Nenshi refused to exempt the police from facing the same austerity measures as all other city departments.

On the eve of the draft budget's release, Colley-Urquhart told reporters the police commission couldn't find all the requested savings without affecting front-line officers.

"We're really not able to comply with the city's direction of reducing," said the veteran member of the police commission.

"This is in order to maintain our authorized strength."

She said the department did find some efficiencies, but wants to be able to pay for 45 new officer hires this year. Additionally, Colley-Urquhart declared that later this month she'll propose adding a further \$5 million to the roughly \$300-million police budget for future growth in the police ranks, in hopes that Premier Alison Redford will help with that top-up.

Nenshi stood out during last year's mayoral election by decrying the Bronconnier council's protection of the police budget, arguing that transit, water and parks were just as deserving of a break. After a mid-campaign spat with police Chief Rick Hanson, the new mayor did extract some 2011 budget concessions.

Nenshi, for his part, said Tuesday he hadn't seen the budget yet, but expects at least one department to claim troubles with the demand for savings.

The police file could be the key flare-up in a budget the mayor predicted will have few surprises. Officials have confirmed it will have minimal impact on the city's 14,000-person workforce, despite the need to find \$140 million in overall savings over three years.

The city's union of indoor workers reported that 21 of its permanent, full-time city workers already got notices their jobs were being eliminated - mostly from the printing and assessment divisions.

"Administration has already taken their cues from council," said Peter Marsden, president of the 4,000-member Canadian Union of Public Employees division. There will be further cuts from the city's temporary and contract staff, he added.

George McLauchlan, the city's human resources director, had said the vast majority of savings to the city's \$3-billion annual operations will come from attrition or axing vacant positions - a far cry from council members' earlier warnings about hundreds of jobs gone.

Property tax increases in the draft budget were set back in June: five per cent next year, 5.1 per cent in 2013 and 5.5 per cent in 2014, tied to population growth and cost increases for city wages and supplies.

But a majority of aldermen said at that summertime meeting that they're open to a greater tax hike if what Nenshi assumed would be "efficiencies" cut too deep into services.

Calgary Transit is set for a big spending bump to accommodate west LRT service, but Mike Mahar of the transit workers' union predicted a clawback in service levels beyond that. "There was certainly some discussion about losing some operational hours, but there's an unrelenting need for more," he said.

The budget will also foretell how user fees will increase. Three straight years of 10 per cent hikes to water and sewage rates are already set, as is a cut to recycling fees and steady increases in the garbage levy.

But the fate of transit fees is unknown. Council has given officials the OK to raise the seniors' pass beyond its longtime rate of \$35 a year - several times lower than what seniors pay in other Canadian cities - as well as the \$40 monthly rate for low-income adults.

At the current pace of increases to the adult passes, it will likely eclipse \$100 by the end of council's three-year budget cycle. A monthly pass is \$90 now, compared with \$75 three years ago.

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