

No extra cash coming for Calgary's snow removal

BY KIM GUTTORMSON, CALGARY HERALD SEPTEMBER 29, 2009 12:15 PM



More money for snow clearing will be debated during this fall's budget talks, vows Ald. Diane Colley-Urquhart, even though city council passed a report Monday that calls for no changes.

Photograph by: Don Healy, Leader-Post

CALGARY - More money for snow clearing will be debated during this fall's budget talks, vows Ald. Diane Colley-Urquhart, even though city council passed a report Monday that calls for no changes.

"We're not done with this yet," she said during a break from council. "It's certainly something we're going to have to balance off with the other challenges ahead.

"But we need to find a way to get that in."

Aldermen have been told that drastically increasing the city's ability to clear snow from city streets would add at least \$14 million a year to the budget, nearly the equivalent of a two per cent property tax increase.

That would allow residential streets to be plowed up to five times a year, but wouldn't include the cost of removing the snow. To both plow and remove the snow twice a year would add another \$88 million.

With a weekend forecast calling for the first flurries of the season, council approved the outline of the roads department's plan, which found savings and ways to improve service. Changes in practice will

improve service by getting to lower priority areas, such as pathways and bus pads, faster.

That allows the department to provide the same level of service overall without an increase to the budget, even though the amount of blacktop needing to be maintained has increased.

Declining revenues has led to a \$50-million shortfall for next year, and while half of those funds have been found, city staff are still looking for up to another \$25 million in savings. As well, all city departments have been asked to find cuts in their budgets amounting to 1.7 per cent.

Council has approved a 6.1 per cent tax increase for next year but hopes to be able to reduce it.

Ald. Ric McIver said he voted against the report because it's "do nothing."

"I think we need to be a little more creative about solutions."

He'd like to see the snow budget more in line with the weather, using savings in years with low snowfall to fund years such as 2008, when city crews were scrambling to keep up with constant snow and cold.

The city's snow clearing budget this year is \$22.2 million, and has increased about four per cent a year, on average. It has been overspent because of weather conditions in 14 of the past 19 years.

McIver expects to see the subject back before council during budget talks.

"Snow clearing is an annual discussion," he said.

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