

April 3, 2009

It's a rare occasion when we get an indication that not everyone at Silly Hall is cuckoo

By [RICK BELL](#)

It could have been killed. But it isn't and it isn't because a majority of city council inhale and exhale different air than the rest of us. Theirs is thin and stale and hot.

They make decisions we can't understand. It's like trying to put a plug in the wrong-sized outlet. The lightbulb will simply not go on.

Still, every once in awhile, we can cobble together a little consolation, a small indication everyone is not quite cuckoo in the cuckoo's nest.

Yesterday is such a day.

First, this scribbler hears from Sharon Purvis, boss of the city's bricks and mortar.

She confirms a decision on when to go ahead with a \$1.7-million fitness facility for city employees at the Municipal Building WILL NOT be made until at least year's end.

Some planning will be done this summer and fall but the green light for the big moolah to design and then build the \$1.7-million gym isn't coming anytime soon, even though the dollars are there after most of council approved the dough in the budget.

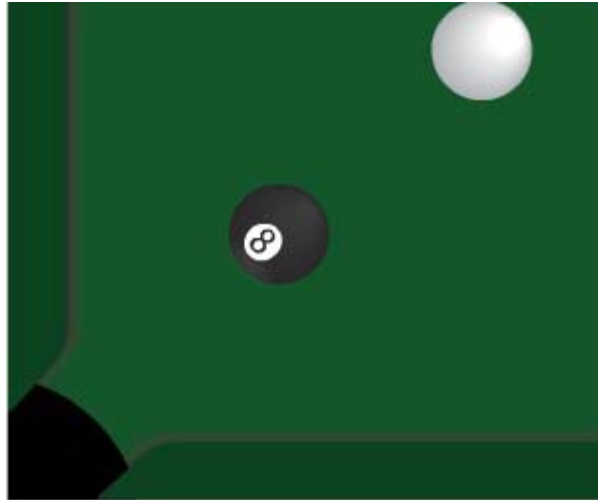
You know, the budget with the 19% tax increase over three years, a figure arrived at after the provincial taxpayers, which means you on your income tax, pick up the tab for paramedics and city taxpayer-owned Enmax kick into the kitty. That budget will be finalized later this month and it is then your tax increase will be engraved in stone.

Even with the cash in hand, Sharon says most of it won't necessarily be spent in 2009.

"Today, we're in a different economic environment and we have to be respectful of that. We want to make sure this is the right time to spend the money. I will make the decisions every step of the way," says Sharon Purvis, the poobah of city properties.

"As the economy changes, the planning you did previously has to be revisited. It's very important we are prudent. We don't operate in a vacuum."

Sharon is asked whether she and her people see the projects on hold and construction sites gone silent.



"We pay attention. These are demonstrations of the impact of the global economy. We'll make the right decision in December on whether to proceed," she says.

Of course, Sharon still supports the exercise digs and gives lots of reasons. It helps recruit staff. It encourages better health. Facilities exist for city employees at other locations. Facilities exist for private sector workers at office towers downtown.

That's where this page and Sharon part ways but the only avenue to see the project kiboshed is for council to do something at budget finalization. It's up to the elected politicians and if you think it's going to happen I'll sell you a designer bridge.

Oops, forgot. Speaking of bridges, Tracy has come to the bridge and, as the saying goes, it's now time for her to cross it.

Tracy McTaggart is the city auditor and she will be starting her probe this month of how the city awards contracts. One area of particular interest is when the city makes a deal without taking bids, as happens when designer Santiago Calatrava scores the contract to design two footbridges over the Bow. You recall the \$25 million. Since giving out contracts without competition is an exception, Tracy is taking a serious peek. One can hope she will be allowed to do her job. She realizes taxpayers are watching.

"When questions are out on the table we take a look," says Tracy.

Just so you know, the city is eyeing a pedestrian bridge across the Elbow and the number \$5 million is out there, not \$25 million. Obviously Santiago is out of luck and, sigh, we won't be as world-class. The city is also hoping the developer in the Mission area picks up at least some of the tab. Good.

And, to round out the trifecta, a gaggle of aldermen and Bronco shoot down the idea of investigating whether to phase out selling bottled water at city facilities.

Toronto is doing it so some people think we should live off Hogtown's fumes.

Ald. Joe Ceci presents the idea. It will cut the amount of plastic bottles in landfills, it will reduce the energy required to manufacture and transport plastic containers. Tap water is all right.

Throughout the debate, Ceci is challenged for picking on water. Ald. Ric McIver says Joe is picking on water. Why not go after sugary drinks?

"I'm not picking on water," says Joe.

Ald. Jim Stevenson also says Joe is picking on water.

"I'm not picking on water," retorts Joe.

Jim wonders if people will have to drink their beer out of a keg through a straw rather than swig it from a bottle.

"I vote for that," says Joe.

Ald. Brian Pincott says Joe is not picking on water. Ald. Diane Colley-Urquhart thinks Joe is picking on the bottlers of water. Bronco is also against but says Joe is not picking on water. Ceci stands firm, like the captain of a ship going down into the deep. The vote is seven to three against.

The fight will go to council but bottled water looks safe.

"I'm not picking on water," insists Joe, before taking his first glug.

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