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## Standing in front of a big pile of garbage Mayor Bronco is a very happy man

By **RICK BELL**

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How fitting, Calgary politicians gathering in front of a very large pile of garbage, all smiles.

Of course, this is the day where, after a bumbling false start, the machinery turns on at the new plant sorting Calgary's recycled rubbish.

Speaking of recycled rubbish, this is also the day we find out the hike on your 2009 property tax bill is not 5.3% as the city set for their half of the action. Once the province's cut is calculated the total tax bump-up for this year is 4.6%, or an increase of \$95 to \$2,138 on middling digs worth \$427,500. A few lattes.

Of course, the numbers don't include basic recycling with the blue Bronco bins at \$96 a year and garbage at \$48, along with other cranked up fees. Don't forget, the add-ons are always bigger than the tax hike. It's a la carte budgeting or ... tee hee ... a la Blue Cart budgeting.

It is like buying the steak and then having to pay for the baked potato, the butter and the sour cream, the mushrooms, the salad.

No matter. Bronco is happy with Bronco. Why not? He survives and thrives. When the budget dust-up settles, he gets most of what he wants.

"Most Calgarians will look and say, given today's economy, it's not a bad number," says Bronco of the 4.6%, looking relaxed, wearing a suit sporting not a single wrinkle.

"City council was doing its job. We stripped it down to as low a number as we could come up with."

Don't laugh. The bigger tax spike on the city side came down back in November when the province picked up the tab for paramedics and when taxpayer-owned Enmax kicked into the kitty. Not many of the spending desires got tossed.

Outrage over the budget did surface. A heated Saturday open house will not be soon forgotten. But the discontent could have been much larger and much louder. No surprise it wasn't. If letters to the editor equalled votes the smart set would cast Calgary as a hotbed of democracy as opposed to being where voter turnout is just a little higher than spots no one can find on a globe or even spell and where nasty characters with nasty guns stand at polling stations so you don't vote.

And, if irate letters to the editor equalled votes against the establishment, most city council members would be sweating cold water and suffering sleepless nights in their designer jammies worrying about their phony-baloney jobs. But they're not. They're smiling in front of a very large pile of garbage.

Of course, the mayor remains miffed with the province. He's won in the past by rattling Edmonton's cage and he looks like he's not stopping anytime soon. This year, the province will take \$36 million more from Calgary because of the city's greater tax base in growth and higher market values. Bronco and his math says Calgarians pay out a larger share of the provincial property tax than back in 2000, including this year where the province's take is greater in this city than across Alberta.

The mayor insists he is not bellyaching.

"I'm not complaining at all. Just leave local taxes at the local level. It's simple," says Bronco, projecting a tax hike of under two points if he gets his way, which he isn't.

If you wish to flash a look of disbelief or utter a few well-chosen words of doubt, please do so now.

Bronco is not only unhappy with the province. He's unhappy with aldermen who say there might be debate on the budget Monday when the arithmetic meets the rubber stamp and the tax bills start getting made out.

"We've seen this movie in the past where no number is low enough and it morphs down into a Dutch auction," says the mayor.

"We already had a healthy and lively debate."

In reality, it was a debate where any remaining illusions about politics were stamped out good and proper.

Remember when eight aldermen were going to stand together and give the city budget a thorough look-see. The eight even included Little Johnny Mar. Recall how, before the credits rolled, only four stalwarts voted against the budget -- Diane Colley-Urquhart, Ric McIver, Joe Connelly and Andre Chabot.

McIver says he is "looking for opportunities" to reduce further. So is Connelly. But there is no feeling of fight left in the dogs of war.

The budget jack-up is under five points and could have been lower but few will raise much of a stink. Andre Chabot doubts whether any budget reconsideration will happen and anyway there's a good chance when the map for the 2010 city election is redrawn Andre's east Calgary seat on council will magically float up to Country Hills Blvd. and northward.

As for one last stand battle on the budget, Bronco smiles again and suggests this scribbler need not show up Monday believing it will be a political brawl for it all.

"I've seen a lot of theatre and this is theatre," he advises.

And the curtain comes down on cue Monday, the garbage duly recycled.

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