

Plow-sy last day at city hall

Final council meeting of the year ends with little action on snow-removal debacle

By RICK BELL

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If a snow-clearing solution was a Christmas gift, Calgarians wouldn't be getting the Tonka truck set.

You would be unwrapping the pretty paper and finding the old standby, more socks and underwear.

And we're not talking Calvin Klein.

Big Red a.k.a. Ald. Diane Colley-Urquhart says it best yesterday, after much talk and less walk from city council.

Aldermen were trying to put a Band-Aid on with one hand while drinking eggnog with the other.

They do a little something but, going into an election year, nothing where the political turtles would actually have to poke their heads out of their comfy, cozy shells.

City council's last chinwag of the year is no surprise.

In fact, the biggest topic over coffee, and one sure to stir, could come from something not even at the huddle.

Big Red will ask council next month to tell the city's paper-shufflers to work on arguments pushing Premier Ed to make winter tires mandatory "during specific times of the year."

"It's not just about snowplows," says Diane, who adds the issue of more dollars for snowplows isn't going away.

"It's road safety and everybody has to do their part."

As for the plows, the to-and-fro among the politicians is called "urgent business" but it sure doesn't look urgent. More like throwing a bone to those howling over snow service.

Ald. Ray Jones scoops up to \$2 million from the coffers of the city's rainy-day fund to help with snow on residential streets by just to the end of 2009, including stationing nine more pieces of equipment in different parts of the city. To Rundle Ray's credit, he knows this is not the big fix. It is, in his words, merely "a start."

But it does help his people in the northeast who were snowed in during this recent mother of all storms.

On the big issue, the major debate, even Jonesy can't believe no one wants to be a hero. No one, and this scribbler means no one, rattles the cages of the paper-shufflers to find dough out of the existing city budget to lessen the odds of another snowstorm horror show.

Even with Bronco off in the city of the little mermaid hanging out with the Apocalypse Now global warming crowd and not able to do any spanking of aldermen at home, little happens.

Ald. Ric McIver wants and will get a report on snow fences which won't go up this winter, if at all.

He asks about \$6.5 million sitting in city funds not doing a whole lot of anything.

McIver, who dropped the gloves a lot more and with greater feistiness when he was known as Dr. No, is given the political equivalent of a pat on the head from the bigwigs.

They tell him they will headscratch about the dollars but it sounds like, if they must, they will move the \$6.5 million to the city's rainy-day fund and not to snow clearing.

Some aldermen and the senior tall foreheads even laugh at him as he mentions plows on the front of buses and garbage trucks.

It is this kind of day.

Ald. John Mar convinces aldermen it would be swell to go to insurance companies and ask them if they would like to pay for some of the snow clearing. You read right.

And we hear this year's snow-clearing budget will not end up in the hole after all because, as with all the other years the budget has been in the hole, the city will move around the loonies.

They will find the extra jingle within the transportation department budget, probably right in roads.

The obvious question. If they can find the money now, why not put the funds in snow clearing in the first place?

But such a decision has been put off -- again. The age-old story just gets older. More cash would mean more equipment, more staff and then more streets would become the city's first priority.

Everyone knows the city has to face the shortage of snowclearing dollars some time. But when?

At the instant after the last council vote, an ominous fire-drill voice, sounding like it's from a bad sci-fi movie, is heard over the city hall speakers.

"An emergency condition exists, exit the building immediately. An emergency condition exists."

Where is that voice when the snow is falling?

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