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Cutting remarks

We asked aldermen how this city could save some of YOUR money -- most had some ideas

By [SHAWN LOGAN](#), SUN MEDIA

City politicians are split on whether there are any reasonable options to pare down a proposed 22% hike on property taxes over the next three years.

The Sun asked each alderman to come up with five cost-saving ideas ahead of budget talks getting underway on Nov. 17.

None could actually come up with that many.

Because the majority of council have yet to see the final budget numbers, few could discuss specific projects they would like to see axed, but many believe the city needs to make major changes to its system to prevent annual property tax hikes that are becoming a further drain on taxpayers in tough economic times.

Here are some of their ideas:

WARD 1

DALE HODGES:

Slashing consultant fees

A freeze on expanding existing programs and some new ones

Cutting the city's \$14.5-million communications budget

The city's longest serving alderman presided over a number of budgets in the 1990s that managed to grow city services without increasing taxes.

Hodges said the city is drowning in consultant fees and a ballooning communications budget that jumped from \$5.5 million in 2003 to \$14.5 million last year for media campaigns, brochures and public consultation.

He noted council's propensity for funnelling money to expand existing programs is also a worrying trend, particularly in a time of growing economic uncertainty.



"Consulting costs for the city are astronomical -- we're seeing big numbers in consultation and we're seeing big numbers in communications," he said.

"Council has to be resisting the temptation to be getting into expanding existing programs, as well as embarking on new ones."

WARD 2

GORD LOWE:

No room to cut

As chair of the city's finance committee, Lowe is one of only two aldermen and the mayor who has seen the budget, as well as working with administration to hammer it together.

While declining to discuss details prior to it being made public on Thursday, Lowe said Calgary's explosive growth has put enormous pressure on the city's operating budget and, short of scaling back essential services demanded by all Calgarians, there's little room to find more savings.

"I'm not prepared to put Calgarians at risk by suggesting we do anything to existing service levels," he said.

"Given the resources we have and the way we do business, short of doing deep cuts to front-line services, there's not many more places we can cut."

WARD 3

JIM STEVENSON:

Hire an independent auditor general to review the city's books annually

Look at potential services to privatize, as well as looking at public-private partnerships for civic infrastructure

Hiring an independent auditor general to delve into the city's books every year, similar to the system used by the federal and provincial governments, could be a way to ensure taxpayers' dollars are being spent responsibly, Stevenson said.

"I think we should have an auditor general, like the feds, who can look at value for dollars in all of our various departments," he said.

"We have no one right now looking at what we're doing and saying we're wasting money."

The rookie alderman also wants the city to explore more potential areas to utilize the private sector to both deliver services and build critical city infrastructure to further reduce the burden on taxpayers.

WARD 4

BOB HAWKESWORTH:

Eliminate spending in non-essential areas, such as mowing some city parks and road right-of-ways

Turn thermostats and air conditioning down in city facilities during months when they're used most

Reduce city's advertising budget

Explore the potential of cutting back in some of the budget's big-ticket items

The city can find some minor cost savings by eliminating some non-essential services, Hawkesworth said, but the reality is, any major savings would come at the cost of major projects.

He said the city could find some cost savings by cutting back on mowing at some city parks and along roads, as well as ensuring air conditioning and thermostats are turned down during the summer and winter months, but those will only lead to a minor dent in the city's operating budget.

"The city could save some money by eliminating some non-essentials," he said.

"If we really want to cut that down, council would have to look at some of the big-ticket items, but at a time when we're just trying to get caught back up, it's difficult."

WARD 4**RAY JONES:**

Did not return calls.

WARD 6**JOE CONNELLY:**

Trim the number of items on priority list to only essential services and work within means to fund other projects

Look into hiring an efficiency expert to ensure council works within its means

The city is spreading itself thin by focusing on too many priority areas, some of which are not vital parts of running a city, said Connelly.

He said part of trimming the fat at city hall means ensuring that the most essential services are put ahead of others and with 25 priority areas being funded this year alone, there are many opportunities to keep the budget down.

"We've got all these overlapping priorities that are running into each other and a lot of these are purely utopian," he said.

"Calgarians are too busy to have to worry about municipal politics and it's our job to make sure we put the emphasis on police, safety, transit -- all the important things."

WARD 7

DRUH FARRELL:

Refused to comment.

WARD 8

JOHN MAR:

Create more efficiencies

Calgary's crime problem prompted council to go outside the budget process to approve \$25 million for more cops and Mar said, while that has been the cause of some of this year's budget woes, it's not an area that should be reversed.

However, he noted there are some areas where the city might be able to reduce some of its bureaucracy, looking at areas in departments where efficiencies can be found and city staff aren't doubling up on some services.

"We need to look at efficiencies and strategies to keep us from overlapping in too many areas," he said.

"Some departments aren't always as efficient as they can be."

WARD 9

JOE CECI:

Wants to wait until budget is released to look at specific items to trim

Ceci is one of the few aldermen who has been closely involved in the budget process as vice-chair of the finance committee, but he said picking and choosing items to remove is not the answer.

Instead, council needs to weigh the implications of anything that is cut and ensure the entire budget is considered before making any changes that will affect service delivery.

"There are ways, I'm sure, we can cut this down but I need to reflect on everything in the budget first," he said.

"There's no question that services are going to be costing more next year than last year but the average household is tightening its belt, why not the city?"

WARD 10

ANDRE CHABOT

Phase major infrastructure projects and expand as needed

Enter lease agreements with the private sector to improve land and buildings acquired by the city

Place more emphasis on user fees for commercial and industrial properties on services such as waste collection, where taxpayers are covering the bulk

With the city awash in infrastructure dollars with \$3.3 billion in provincial funding over the next decade, Chabot worries council is spending that money too fast to keep up.

He said every time the city builds a fire station or buys an LRT car, it has to provide personnel, equipment and ongoing maintenance so he would like to see the city slow down and take a breath before paying for more than it can afford.

"I would have to say we're spending far too much, much too quickly, and trying to accommodate too many citizens' concerns too quickly," he said.

"These days you can't afford to do it all at once so we have to be smarter about how we spend."

WARD 11

BRIAN PINCOTT

Find synergies between city departments to help trim costs while providing the same services

Like taxpayers, the city is seeing its costs skyrocket and in order to continue providing services and making the city sustainable, those who pay the bills are going to feel a pinch, Pincott said.

But the city should also look at its own operations and find ways to get the best bang for the buck, he said, noting the parks and roads department could work together to slow down traffic, using tree-lined streets instead of speed bumps as a cost effective way to provide traffic calming.

"One of the places we need to work on is how to find synergies within the city because right now I don't think we're very good at that," he said.

WARD 12

RIC McIVER

Be tougher in evaluating outside requests for money from the city

A more transparent budget process that allows more time for the public and council to review it and suggest alternatives

Significantly curb what the city spends on its communications budget

Adopt zero-based budgeting and put a cap on annual tax hikes to no more than inflation

The city continues to be besieged by annual requests from non-profit agencies and others and council might have to start taking a harder line as a means of keeping costs down, McIver said.

The Ward 12 alderman, who has long advocated starting every year's budget from scratch instead of just bumping city departments' funding a certain percentage every year, said before handing over money to arts groups and others in need of funding, council should be more choosy and remember it is spending taxpayer dollars.

WARD 13

DIANE COLLEY-URQUHART

Reconsider spending moves that preempt budget deliberations such as \$25 million for 200 new cops

Drastically slash the budget priority lists

Do an external review on the city's budget process

Stop spending money in areas that are provincial and federal responsibilities, such as affordable housing

The city's entire budget system needs to be re-examined, said Colley-Urquhart.

She said council started with a list of 81 priorities that was slashed to 25, but still too many.

"These are extraordinary times and it shouldn't be business as usual around here -- having 81 priorities is unacceptable when the future is uncertain," she said.

"We are not going to wrestle this problem by nibbling around the edges -- we have to do business differently."

WARD 14

LINDA FOX-MELLWAY

Did not return calls.

MAYOR DAVE BRONCONNIER

The mayor declined to comment on any cost-saving measures that could be considered prior to the budget being released on Thursday.