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Bronco's budget battle victory

City hall hawks sound more like budgies as mayor gets his way on 4.8% tax increase

By RICK BELL

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Bronco wins.

He backs a 4.8% tax hike. It comes in just a fraction of a fraction under the number.

The hawks are more like budgies. Chirping a lot but sure no fighters.

All this talk of getting the budget down further and showing Bronco who is boss is just that. Talk.

Yes, always knew downtown was a two-bit operation.

At one point, late in the day, city council has cut the average yearly property tax bill by about a quarter.

We're not talking a quarter of your tax bill. We're talking a quarter, as in 25 cents, the coin with the caribou on it. A year. Forest Lawn's Ald. Andre Chabot can take a bow moving that molehill forward.

It is quite a day. Actually it is not quite a day unless you've never been at city council. If you live and breathe the big blue playpen nothing surprises or will ever surprise you again.

The city budget for 2010 is debated and you realize one thing very quickly. Some of the aldermen have not read the budget. You can tell. They fumble around like a kid in high school math class flipping through his textbook trying to find the questions he didn't do.

Then the other shoe drops. Some of the aldermen may have read the budget but they do not understand what the words and the numbers mean. You can tell by the questions being asked.

High-school student councils have a better grasp of their books. The fact the budget requires the mathematical skill of a Grade 7 student poses a problem.

Thankfully, an alderman or two say nothing, so at least they leave observers thinking the best is yet to come. A precious few have done their homework.

When people don't vote and don't follow what's going on, you get what you get.

Ah, what a day. Ald. Jim Stevenson from this city's northeast wants to drop the daily hit for park-and-ride lots from \$3 to \$1.

He is told he can't dip into the city's piggy bank of back-up bucks. Porky is only for one-off withdrawals.

No one wants to hike taxes, especially since they've only found a whole quarter in cuts. Then the paper-shufflers are asked what the impact will be if Jim gets his way.

It is then we experience a blast from the past. You see, in the old days, city council would ask their hired hands to find cuts and they would. Horrible cuts, evil cuts. They would suggest nixing a lot of stuff citizens liked and the cuts wouldn't happen and the bureaucrats would smile.

In this case, the bigwigs say if park-and-ride gets a break, transit hours of service will be chopped, as will the number of transit cops, as will the budget for cleaning and maintenance.

As expected, the move from \$3 to \$1 is squashed.

Graffiti cleanup gets money but it's from the piggy bank of so-called reserve funds.

Snow-clearing gets a million for each of two years, again from Porky. It's the mayor's brainwave and will deal with a few snowy problem spots and that's it.

A dozen more transit cops don't happen. Artificial turf fields do. Bus rapid transit parking is free. The price of a low-income transit pass doesn't go up next year.

Ald. Ric McIver talks about the need for "an attitude change." He wants city managers to squeeze some more blood from the stones.

"There's more to get," says the alderman, but he does not offer specifics.

The so-called fiscally frugal pick away half-heartedly, at best. McIver suggests a cut to corporate services. Those opposing call it a shot in the dark. He's done.

McIver also loses on getting a break for Race City Speedway.

Bronco's plan for parking, as mentioned on this page a few days ago, goes ahead. Short-stay parking rates in the downtown are cut. Charging for parking on Sundays and at night is toast.

The budget for the parking authority is sent back to them to be revised.

In the end, the city is looking at a tax increase of 4.79%.

Chabot tries to get it to 4.5% but only by raiding that old piggy bank.

McIver wants city brass to try and find another 1% drop in taxes -- cuts of more than \$9 million. Council passes his request but, no guarantees.

Bronco waxes poetic about all the good things the city does. It sure sounds like a campaign speech.

Ald. Gord Lowe, the city budget boss also known as Bronco With A Beard, says: "I think we have achieved our goal."

No kidding.

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