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## As Silly Hall rears its ugly numbers the Common Sense Six will have to play hardball for taxpayers to get any reprieve from the budget

By [RICK BELL](#)

Well, this is one snow job you can't go out and blame on the weatherman.

Gord Lowe, Bronco's budget boss, and so tied to the mayor he is called Bronco with a Beard, was once an air-traffic controller and knows a thing or two about spotting turbulence on the radar.

Silly Hall's nasty numbers come out at High Noon today and they will be ugly, especially the upcoming first-year whack in a new three-year city budget. The economy is not as it was just a few short months ago, but it is business as usual at the hall. With user fees and higher utilities and a tax hike, it will not be pretty.

Gord pulls out all the stops and offers up a shtick the mayor promised would never happen, the old standby, claiming they've cut to the bone, in fact, cut into the bone, and to do more would hurt the growth in front-line services -- police, fire and paramedics.

To fiddle with the budget now, says Gord, would have Calgarians "see a significant decrease in front-line services in '09."

He then goes on, and you can almost hear the violins on cue, "others haven't been funded anywhere near their requests, in some cases to the detriment of a well-operated city."

Earth to Silly Hall. All over this city, especially in this time of topsy-turvy markets, far more turvy than topsy, funding is nowhere near requests.

The plea to taxpayers continues. You have to understand how the game works. Silly Hall calls what they do budgeting but it is not budgeting. With a budget, you look at how much money you have and divvy up the dough.

In the city's adventures in arithmetic, they come up with their wish list and then figure out how much they can squeeze you before you squeal. Usually, they can squeeze a lot and Calgarians squeak but suck it up.

A equals B. We have a big budget and a fear factor just to make sure you take what's coming to you.



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"We're striving hard to maintain the level of services," says Gord, who speaks of a "huge pent-up demand" only something around a 22% jacking up in taxes over three years can begin to satisfy.

"We contained our spending. We contained the tax increases. We contained everything." Right.

Hell, the mayor and his minions even toss in dollars to pay for EMS in each of the next three years, even though the province takes over cutting the cheques in April.

"EMS is a big question," says Gord, admitting 2% could be knocked off the property tax rate if those services were off the books. But they are on the books for three years.

Don't look for the mayor's side to go for any outside experts taking a peek at the city's balance sheet. Gord says the city already has an auditor. And when has this auditor uncovered big-time waste? Thought so.

Joe the Alderman, also known as Joe Connelly, is one of the Common Sense Six, those city council members with some connection to the real world. Their names: McIver, Connelly, Colley-Urquhart, Chabot, Jones and Stevenson.

Joe the Alderman is looking at the idea of a "wage freeze" for city workers along with other cuts since he says, "I was not elected to increase taxes."

"Calgarians have an expectation we will do everything we can to reduce taxes and keep a lid on it. They're not happy and I've heard them.

"The city of Calgary isn't a utopia. It's a business. We have to run it as a business."

So each of the sensible aldermen have possible places to trim once they see the math. Spin doctors, consultants? Who knows?

The flaky sorts, of course, won't be happy until you make all their dreams come true, visions of the future closer to hallucinations.

The building of one designer foot bridge across the Bow and the sketching out of another is going ahead for a cool \$25 million.

More than half the aldermen wanted to reconsider the spending but the rules say two-thirds have to want to take a look. For the record, those who backed the bridges are: Bronco, Lowe, Ceci, Hawkesworth, Mar, Fox-Mellway and Farrell.

Can't wait to see all those tourists show up when those bridges get built. People will come from as far away as ... Balzac.

And yesterday, the aldermen also jabbered on about the \$165 million they're spending on art. An official presented but you would need a Baffle-gab-English dictionary to understand.

"Four archetypes are already embedded within the context for the criteria."

That was the good bit.

Let us not forget Little Johnny Mar, the alderman who campaigned as a stand-up Batman and turned into the Joker. Ald. Mar doesn't want to be the Joker any more and who can blame him.

This columnist promises Mar if he would join the Common Sense Six he could have the keys to the Batmobile.

"I've got some cuts coming," he promises. But is he joking? We shall see soon enough.