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Budget debate goes public

Aldermen urge Calgarians to let council know how they feel about three-year plan

By [TARINA WHITE](#), SUN MEDIA

Calgarians outraged by the city's proposed 25% tax increase over three years will get their chance to lash out at an open house on the weekend.

City council and administration will host a public open house this Saturday from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. at the plaza level of City Hall, 800 Macleod Tr. S.E. Senior city staff will be on hand to speak with citizens about the 2009-2011 proposed budget, which would see the average homeowner shell out an additional \$660 for property taxes and utilities by 2011.

A promotional banner for Capital One MasterCard. The background is dark blue. At the top, the text "Hey Canada, Get Guaranteed Approval!" is written in white. Below this, on the left, is an image of a Capital One MasterCard with a red maple leaf design. To the right of the card, the text "New to credit? Get started with a guaranteed Capital One® MasterCard.®" is displayed in white. A green button with the text "Click here to apply." is positioned below the card and text. At the bottom left is the Capital One logo, and at the bottom right is the text "Visit www.capitalone.ca for details."

Ald. Diane Colley-Urquhart, who opposes introducing the hefty tax hikes, is urging Calgarians worried about the proposed budget to make their concerns known in person.

"We really, really need a show of support here," she said yesterday.

"I want to hear from people directly on the impact these kind of exorbitant taxes have on them -- that's when it really hits home."

Last week, the city unveiled its 2009-2011 budget, which calls for \$7.9 billion to be spent on operating costs and another \$7.6 billion for infrastructure.

To pay for that, the city is looking at a 9.6% tax increase in 2009, 6.8% in 2010 and 6.9% in 2011.

Because tax increases in 2010 and 2011 are applied to previous years' increases, the total compounded tax hike by 2011 will be 25.1%.

In 2009, the hike would see an annual property tax bill of \$1,185 on a home valued at \$430,000, combined with \$1,232 in utility fees, once new monthly charges for waste collection and the city's curbside recycling program are factored in.

Ald. Ric McIver is also lobbying his colleagues to find ways to reduce the hefty tax increases.

"With the economic situation as it is right now, we should be trying to lighten the load on people," he said.

He encourages Calgarians to also voice their concerns directly to council at the Nov. 17 meeting, when the proposed budget will go to a vote.

"I think that would be a good place to make an impact," said McIver, adding public speakers are each given five minutes to address council and must provide 35 copies of their presentation.

Colley-Urquhart is hopeful Calgarians will take the time to put some heat on council.

"I sense that it's different this time and that there is an uprising against this tax increase -- it's viewed as being very arrogant and a total disconnect, that city hall is not listening," she said.