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Aldermen taking a \$5,000-a-year raise during an economic meltdown deliver nothing less than a slap in the face to taxpayers footing the bill

By [RICK BELL](#)

Nuts. Plain nuts. Yes, the old logic rings hollow.

You know, money buys better people. The rules are the rules and must be followed.

It is all so much wind.

The fact is what it is. Taking a 5.5% pay hike -- \$5,000 and pushing the annual salary of an alderman within a whisker of six digits, not including benefits -- is just not right.

At this time and in these circumstances, where nobody this page knows is getting a 5.5% raise and many of us are getting less, council accepting this increase is as close to a middle finger as you're going to see in this family newspaper.

As Ald. Andre Chabot, voice of east Calgary, says of the pay raise so soon after council voted to scoop almost the same percentage in more taxes: "It's a double slap in the face."

And Andre is not about to turn the other cheek.

Tomorrow he is going to serve notice on city council. He wants this raise debated Jan. 26 and he wants the hike cut in half to 2.75%.

Now, what is amazing, if we can find anything amazing anymore, is Andre's idea likely won't go through.

And the east Calgary alderman still backs more pay, just not as much.

You would think the leaders on council would stick at least a toe in the trenches in a year where almost all of us look like we'll have to take a bite of nasty.

Yah right.

When you see politics as poker and always call the public's bluff and almost always win, why change?

Calgarians get angry but will not walk a block and mark an X once every three years. I don't



get it.

For what it's worth, folks are upset again.

"I've had a lot of phone calls. No one agrees with the pay hike," says Andre.

"Our economy does not support a 5.5% pay hike.

"People see cuts everywhere and then council takes a raise like this one."

Andre was the No. 1 alderman for suggesting places to reduce the city budget, which means he was also the No. 1 alderman shot down by those of his colleagues who missed the kindergarten class where the use of scissors was taught.

Andre says, since he asked city departments to reduce, he now has to walk the talk.

"If I want them to cut their budgets it would be kind of two-faced of me if I'm not prepared to take a cut."

And remember, just as the suggested budget cuts were mostly reductions of increases and not real cuts, Andre is only suggesting a smaller jump in council pay cheques.

Council members who want every single cent, including Bronco, will say it's not about them. They are not giving themselves more money but are just following a formula based on average wage increases in Alberta last year.

Well, formulas are to be followed in most cases but politics is not chemistry.

Things change and, with this year, change is expected to be big and pretty is not the first word to come to mind.

Ald. Diane Colley-Urquhart wants to take a step more than Andre. Big Red wants NO pay hike in 2009 because of the "extraordinary circumstances" in the economy. Reality trumps the formula.

"We are elected by the people and we are here to reflect, to the best of our ability, the concerns, issues and circumstances taxpayers are experiencing," says Diane.

"The current salary should be frozen. This is a way to show people we get it.

"And I consider myself fortunate I have a job guarantee for the next two years."

Diane also doesn't agree with aldermen who want to take the raise and donate it to charity. It's taxpayer dough.

For this columnist, there's another problem. With the 5.5%, every time council talks tough to its workers ... well, they will lose that argument.

Ald. Joe Connelly, known as Joe the Alderman, is in favour of the 5.5%. To his credit, Joe has tried to teach some of his fellow aldermen the fundamentals of Grade 3 arithmetic. If you

add, add, add and add, you get a real big number at the end.

But Joe thinks more bread will make it easier to attract those who have probably passed Grade 3 arithmetic to run for council.

"I'm not proud of a lot of decisions made by council but you get what you pay for," says Joe the Alderman.

"At the end of the day, if you want better decisions, you have to pay better to make it attractive for business people and community leaders."

Unfortunately, provincial politicians have scored all kinds of coin in recent years and the mugs and benchwarmers still abound.

Gord Lowe, city budget boss, weighs into the fray.

Gord and this page don't always see eye to eye but the man is no crybaby, like some thin-skinned politicians who pout and assume the fetal position when folks disagree with them.

Gord says the 5.5% is based on last year and, if this year's earnings tank, then council will bite the bullet next year.

"If it goes into negative territory, that's what we get."

Gord, a pay cut? Don't tempt us.