

INSIDE CITY HALL: CITY BUDGET

Miller naysayers get chance to 'put up or shut up'

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For Toronto city councillors dismayed at what they see as Mayor **David Miller's** spending (too much) and revenue projections (too squishy) for the city this year, today's budget committee meeting is the political equivalent of "put up or shut up."

The session is the first shot for councillors (the public gets its chance tomorrow) to ask questions and recommend changes to the \$8.7-billion operating budget before it comes before them in late March for a vote. So, will the mayor's critics suggest ways to cut the \$80-million needed to spare taxpayers Mr. Miller's proposed 4-per-cent tax hike?

"It is premature to make any comment on that until I get more of my questions answered," **Denzil Minnan-Wong** (Ward 34, Don Valley East) said last week, after he and some other members of city hall's disparate opposition accused the mayor of trying to sneak through the equivalent of a 10-per-cent tax hike (if you count other user fees approved by council).

Mr. Minnan-Wong said it is hard for non-Milleristas to extract answers from a city bureaucracy that, in his view, "has closed ranks in terms of disclosure of information."

Last week, Mr. Minnan-Wong and fellow Councillors **Karen Stintz, Cliff Jenkins, David Shiner, Michael Walker, John Parker** and **Michael Thompson** summoned the media to watch as they unfurled a handmade banner with a giant "10 per cent" scrawled in red to make the claim that city hall is reaching deep into the wallets of taxpayers.

Frustrated media hounds began yelping for details, such as which services should be cut back, but answers weren't forthcoming. Eventually, Mr. Walker stepped up with a vague call to cut transit spending.

Two days after the budget's release, Mr. Minnan-Wong still defended the strategy to offer few specifics right off the bat: "The budget wasn't put together in 48 hours and it is not reasonable to think it could be analyzed in 48 hours."

But even as city hall's so-called "ragged right" tried to present a united front, some ideological allies stayed on the sidelines.

Doug Holyday (Ward 3, Etobicoke Centre), who did not take part in the "10 per cent" event and is seen by some of the event's participants as a lone wolf, has his own bill of particulars tomorrow for budget chief **Shelley Carroll** and her committee.

Mr. Holyday said he won't support the 4-per-cent tax hike and scoffed at the mayor's call for almost \$70-million in taxpayer-backed aid for the TTC. "We should be looking at some [spending] cuts," he said, suggesting a transit fare hike (not the current freeze suggested by the mayor) to ease the load on taxpayers.