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Councillor apologizes for shouting at citizen

'Come on down, baby'

Natalie Alcoba, National Post

City Councillor Paula Fletcher has apologized for an angry confrontation with a citizen who questioned City Hall's spending habits during public hearings on Toronto's budget.

In a scene indicative of just how frayed people's nerves are over city finances, Ms. Fletcher, a staunch ally of Mayor David Miller, got into a shouting match on Monday night with a man identified as John Smith, who spoke against tax and fee hikes.

Employing a prosecutorial tone, Ms. Fletcher (Toronto-Danforth) asked if Mr. Smith expected her to cut funding for the arts, breakfast programs, or subsidized daycare spots.

"Councillor, you're asking me to do your job. Are you seeking re-election in [October]? You're being paid to make tough decisions," Mr. Smith said.

"No, no, that's not what I'm asking. I'm asking you if you are telling us to cut more," Ms. Fletcher responded.

"There are many young people tonight that haven't driven down here like you. Should we cut Transit City so they can't get down here from North York, and Rexdale and Malvern? Is that your suggestion? Is that your suggestion tonight, called down here by the John Tory show," she screamed. (John Tory did his Newstalk 1010 radio show from City Hall on Monday, and has been encouraging listeners to speak at budget hearings for weeks.)

"You should be fired," someone else yelled from the rotunda.

"Oh, come and run against me. Come on down, baby!" Ms. Fletcher shot back, as budget chief Shelley Carroll tried to rein in the outburst. Ms. Carroll then urged her colleague to get some sleep.

On his radio program yesterday, Mr. Tory-- the former provincial PC leader who had considered a run for mayor -- said he did not know Mr. Smith and called the councillor's behaviour "abusive."

Ms. Fletcher's colleagues also criticized the outburst.

"I think it's fair game to go after the Board of Trade, but not Joe Blow who has come in from Rexdale after listening to John Tory," said Councillor Kyle Rae, who sits on the budget committee. "That's

what I found unacceptable of my colleagues. I don't ask questions of people who I don't expect to know the answers. They're letting off steam, let them let off steam."

Said Councillor Paul Ainslie (Scarborough East): "Disgusting is a good word for it."

At the start of yesterday's deputations, Budget Chief Shelley Carroll read a public apology from Ms. Fletcher.

"It is extremely important to have citizens involved in civic affairs," Ms. Fletcher wrote in a letter. She apologized "if my tone was argumentative or if they believe I do not value their participation in the budget process."

In his deputation, Mr. Smith had said he did not represent any group, but shared the views of others who feel "tapped out" by escalating property taxes, user fees, and taxes like the vehicle and land transfer tax.

"We elected a council that we thought was going to get these expenses under control," he said. "Maybe we need a council that learns to say to some of the groups that come looking for our tax dollars, you need to just say no. Somehow it's got to get done."

Mr. Rae said of his seven years on the budget committee and 15 years of listening in on budgets, he's never seen it get this nasty.

"There's a lot of anger on our part" due to downloading, "but there's a lot of anger on the part of the citizens watching, as there is a fear about losing services," he said.

Stuart Green, a spokesman for Mr. Miller, said budget deputations should be a conversation between residents and their elected officials.

"If they appear before the committee to make their case for either decreased taxes or increased funding for certain programs, members of council are entitled to ask them questions about their rationale. But at the same time that should be done with mutual respect and professionalism," he said.

He said that by councillor's own admission, she crossed the line Monday night. "She shouldn't have engaged in a shouting match with him," he said, but added she has apologized and it is time to move on.