



Interest groups make their budget pitch

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MICHAEL STUPARYK/TORONTO STAR

Among the people who showed up at city hall to comment on Toronto's proposed \$8.7 billion operating budget were members of the Action for Neighbourhood Change community program. More public meetings are planned before the budget is finalized by council on March 31 and April 1. (Feb. 18, 2009)

More firefighters, road tolls proposed – and eliminate planting trees to save money

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Donovan Vincent
and John Spears
city hall bureau

More than 80 speakers representing the arts, business, labour, cultural organizations, cyclists, social service agencies and other interests got their chance to show their support for or opposition to Toronto's proposed \$8.7 billion operating budget at city hall yesterday.

The budget is to be finalized by council March 31 and April 1, with several public meetings planned before that.

Here are some highlights from yesterday's meeting:

BUSINESS

Toronto Board of Trade president and CEO Carol Wilding presented a fairly lengthy wish list to the budget committee, urging council to fashion a multi-year budget to improve long-term planning, and extracting \$150 million in savings instead of the \$102 million the budget committee found. But Wilding declined to name a specific area that should be trimmed, saying that isn't her organization's role.

The theme of her presentation was "Balanced but not Sustainable," based on the argument that this year's proposed budget relies on one-time funds, including \$238 million from last year's surplus from the province.

To that end, the city should plan future budgets on the presumption it will get no new assistance from senior governments, Wilding added.

"If the key goal here is to protect the level of services, to really wrap a fiscal plan around them, (and) to continue to make Toronto competitive, then relying on one-time funding as a key contingency just isn't the responsible way forward," she said.

"We're not asking for handouts. We're only asking for reversal of destructive policies like the land transfer tax that impacts the housing market."

–Von Palmer, spokesperson, Toronto Real Estate Board

ARTS AND CULTURE

"We know that this is a particularly difficult year for city council as it develops the municipal budget. We know that money is tight. But we do want to reiterate that the cultural sector is an economic engine that drives prosperity in the city."

–Cameron Bailey, co-director, Toronto International Film Festival

LABOUR

While police and ambulance services have been allowed to increase their staff since amalgamation in 1998, Toronto Fire Services has seven fewer firefighters than it did then, Scott Marks, president of the Toronto Professional Fire Fighters' Association, pointed out.

Meanwhile, he said, the number of call responses is up 37 per cent.

The fire service runs aerial trucks routinely with three firefighters, four in the hospital corridor when staffing permits, but not the five recommended by the National Fire Protection Association, he said. Some 24 more firefighters are needed to staff aerials downtown to meet the association's standard.

"The average family tax bill provides \$240 for fire protection for the whole year. That's \$20 a month. Basically what we're saying is, for about \$21 or \$22 a month you can have the proper service," Marks said.

YOUTH

Keegan Henry-Mathieu, of the Toronto Youth Cabinet, didn't just tell the committee where to spend more; he also told them where to get the money by spending less.

The Neighbourhood Action Plan, which designates 13 underserved "priority neighbourhoods" in the city, needs \$360,000 more, he said. Then he told councillors where that money could be found:

"Although the Toronto Youth Cabinet supports making Toronto a clean and beautiful city, we ask that you reconsider spending \$1 million on planting 57,000 trees in a city that, according to Statistics Canada, has more green space than any municipality in the country."

TOLLS

Kevin Love watched his father, Robert Love, a business professor at McMaster University, die of cancer attributed to environmental causes in 2007. He was 73.

The younger Love noted that Toronto Public Health attributes 440 premature deaths and 1,700 hospitalizations each year to air pollution caused by traffic.

Love told yesterday's hearing:

"Because car and truck pollution is killing people, it's time to tax and reduce it.

"My proposal is to have a toll of 20 cents a kilometre on all Toronto roads, which would increase to \$1 a kilometre on smog pollution days when the air quality index goes over 30. This would have the effect of discouraging the production of pollution on the days when it kills and injures the most people."

COMMUNITY AGENCIES

"We are glad the city has increased its funding to the city department that funds drop-ins. ... They are places where people can build a community of peers, gain strength and support each other.

"If the 4 per cent increase in property taxes is necessary to make sure that Toronto drop-ins stay open, and that more people have a home, then it's a small price to pay."

–Eileen Shannon, Toronto Drop-in Network