

CUPE LOCAL 500 BRIEF TO CITY COUNCIL, JANUARY 29, 2013

RE: 2013 OPERATING BUDGET, CITY OF WINNIPEG

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before City Council to present our views on the proposed 2013 Operating Budget.

As you all know, I represent City workers who are the frontline delivery agents of the city services funded from this budget. So, when we comment on the 2013 Operating Budget, it's from the point of view of our members and their families, who are also taxpayers and use our City services.

I'd like to begin my comments around the budget planning process. We believe the City has let down the public in how it has developed this budget. This year's budget process was exclusive of any public consultation and input. The citizens of Winnipeg have the right not only to choose their elected representatives, but also to have their opinions known on significant decisions that will affect them. We know that a genuinely public engagement process will help increase citizen support, understanding and ownership of decisions made. Therefore, it is important that the City engage its residents, elected officials, employees and business people in the budget process. In this case, the public has had very little time to:

- a) review the budget; and
- b) actually understand the implications of what the budget means to them.

Merits in this budget:

We view the proposed property tax increase as a positive decision. Taxes are not popular, but necessary. Don't forget we are taxpayers too. At the very least, property taxes should keep up with inflation due to the rising costs of fuel, materials, etc. We believe that dedicating 1% of the proposed property tax increase for street renewal is also a step in the right direction to help improve the poor state of our roads and sidewalks.

We do, however, have concerns regarding a number of items in this budget that we feel important to discuss:

Councillors' Ward Allowance/New Policy Development and Communications office:

In our view, an increase of \$600,000 towards Councillors' ward allowances is significant and should be deferred until a further study/needs analysis can be undertaken. We are also opposed to spending \$579,136 for a new policy and communications office. There is not enough information on the roles and responsibilities of this office. We think these funds could be better spent on infrastructure or other public service needs. However, we do agree with the motion passed at the Standing Committee on Finance on December 3, 2012, namely:

“ . . . to earmark funds in the 2013 Operating Budget for a new public consultation process that will take place in the first half of 2013 to assist with the development of the 2014 Operating and Capital Budgets. The new consultation process may include, but not be limited to, holding focus groups, public meetings, public opinion polling and online input”.

As we said previously, meaningful and effective public engagement will improve the quality of decisions made.

Vacancy Management:

There is \$13 million in Vacancy Management in this budget. This practice has taken its toll on almost every single department within the City of Winnipeg. It is inconceivable to think that the workforce can continue to absorb these levels of cutbacks, while still maintaining service levels to the public. We believe that Vacancy Management is a non-transparent erosion of the City’s frontline services and will impair the City’s ability to deliver needed programs.

Accelerating the Alternate Service Delivery (ASD) review and implementation process.

The budget contains an allocation of \$300,000 for this process. It further notes an anticipated savings of \$2 million each year. The Union questions what is being “accelerated” and where are these projected savings identified in the budget? As we’ve mentioned time and time again, the ASD process is flawed and history has shown it doesn’t work.

Grant reductions:

Reducing the grant amounts to museums, seniors programs and other non-profit agencies, will greatly impact the elderly and families in our community. At the very least, these programs should receive status quo funding.

Recreation Programs/User Fees:

Recreation programs such as “Learn to Swim”, has been burdened with long waiting lists for residents. Lack of program space and affordability means many of the residents who would most benefit from these programs can’t get in, or can’t afford them.

The city also provides various “Learn to Skate” programs at our city-owned arenas. Public skating is valued by many families, as it provides recreation opportunities to children who cannot afford to play organized hockey or ringette.

These recreation programs help to keep kids off the streets and are crucial to the health and well-being of our communities. If we cannot maintain swimming pools, recreation centres and programs, many individuals, young people and families will not have the opportunity to remain physically active and healthy.

Conclusion

It's important to conclude our comments on the operating budget by looking at what's been happening in our city and to our public services over the past number of years.

We think it's time for the City to reverse the thinking that the private sector is better able to provide quality public services than the public sector. The experience all across Canada is that private delivery of public services or privatization of public infrastructure is not working and ends up costing more. Public sector workers with the guidance of progressive and innovative political leaders have been proven again and again as the best people to deliver public services.

As public sector workers, we are prepared to put in the extra effort needed to meet the needs of Winnipeggers. But to do this, we need a budget that provides the financial resources to do so.

Thank you.

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