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2012 Preliminary Operating Budget: Madly Off in All Directions

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2012 Preliminary Operating Budget: Madly Off in All Directions

Winnipeg's 2012 Preliminary Operational Budget continues this City's rudderless, meandering approach to running the city. The Budget lacks a central policy goal or cohesive vision for the future direction of our city. When we examine the details of the budget, about the only conclusion that we arrive at is that Winnipeg will have large numbers of police officers and fire fighters. While there is a vague attempt to meet the community's needs in the budget, there is a general lack of attention to addressing major social, economic and infrastructure needs Winnipeggers face.

Individuals and families are going to see more fees and charges for the services they use. They are going to pay out more while the city claims to be cutting costs by "creating efficiencies" and somehow still maintaining social and physical infrastructure. Water and sewer, garbage collection, and recreational services and programs are all going to cost us more.

The city has been creating "efficiencies" for years now, which is simply a way of saying that it will not be filling vacancies. It could also mean it will be cutting jobs. This language implies that government is by nature inefficient and that more

efficient ways must be found to deliver services. In reality, this year's \$13 million in cuts will likely reduce the number of services available and the staff who delivers those services, which is why we say that the average Winnipegger will receive less in spite of paying more (in taxes and services fees). These sorts of cuts end up creating a self-fulfilling prophecy: as services and staff are undermined, people get the sense that their municipal government cannot meet their needs. Frustrated, voters then begin to listen to the privatization schemes, such as public-private partnerships and the selling off of golf courses to private developers, being touted by some councilors as fixes for Winnipeg's revenue woes.

Though affecting fewer people, ambulance service, dog licenses and building permits are also going to cost more. For example, the increase in the city rate for EMS will go up from \$383 in 2011 to \$479 in 2012. The increase for treatment without transit would increase from \$153 to \$192. These represent a 25% increase in the price of both services, which will earn the city \$3 million. It makes sense to increase fees when doing so serves another policy goal, such as reducing pollution, but making it more prohibi-

tive for sick and/or injured people to get medical care is a punitive move that ends up doing more harm than good, not to mention the stress it places on low-income Winnipeggers.

There are vague commitments to “protecting our city’s natural areas and heritage resources”, but the budget allots a paltry \$250,000 increase to protecting our elm-tree forest when much more is required to make up for the neglect of the past decade. There is no serious attention to supporting our golf courses and green space, which is worrisome in light of council’s declared interest in allowing private developers to have access to city-owned golf courses.

These desperate measures do not reflect a coherent, measured approach to addressing

fiscal and infrastructure needs. It appears that City officials are trying to patch up our social and commercial systems just enough until others (private sector, the province or the federal government) step in with ideas and investment. The budget gives businesses a tax break, but on the spending side, the City is ignoring other cost factors and avoiding opportunities to stimulate the economy over the long term. This document will explain some of the more important changes in spending that will affect Winnipeggers.

In doing so, it will not specifically reference the 2012 capital budget that was passed in November, 2011. Readers should keep in mind that the capital and operating budgets are closely related.

The Revenue Dilemma

On the revenue side, the preamble to the budget explains accurately the difficulties facing municipalities in Canada. What it does not explain is why this council has, until this year, stubbornly refused to employ an obvious tool it had at its disposal; incremental property tax increases that would have at least kept up with inflation.

By refusing to be honest with Winnipeggers and taking the more politically risky, but responsible step to slowly raise taxes, council has now had to implement a much stiffer 3.5% increase that, onerous as it seems, still doesn't correct for the increase in inflation over the duration of the tax freeze. And we must remember that

there was a tax rate decrease under Glen Murray's tenure, leaving us with a 6% *decrease* in the tax rate between 1999 – 2011.

As shown in Table I, Winnipeg is an outlier among other Canadian cities. For example, other prairie cities have seen significant increases in property taxes in the past twelve years. These data demonstrate that other cities have been much more proactive in dealing with revenue shortfalls.

Instead of being honest with Winnipeggers about the fiscal challenges that the property tax freeze had created, Mayor Katz campaigned on maintaining the freeze.

Winnipeg	-6%
Edmonton	59%
Calgary	52%
Saskatoon	45%
Regina	31%

In the last civic election, Mayor Katz warned that low-income Winnipeggers were going to lose their houses if his main rival, who advocated a 2% property tax increase, became mayor. The mayor circulated a robo call, stating that “People should not lose their homes when there are other avenues to consider.”¹ One must ask why this danger does not seem to arise under Katz’s steeper 3.5% increase, especially given that lower-value houses will see bigger increases in absolute terms. Also, why are these “other avenues” not available to consider this year?

Yet as a result of its property tax rate freeze, the city has placed itself in a serious revenue straightjacket. Table 3 shows that after adjusting for inflation, the city earned 5.6% less in property tax in 2011 than it did in 2001. Even after the proposed 2012 increase, it will earn 2.2% less, after inflation, than it did in 2001. The city has attempted to make up for this shortfall in a variety of ways, like the increase in the frontage levy² (which appears on your city tax bill, but is not officially a property tax) and increasing a wide range of fees and charges. Some of these, like increasing the rate for dumping in landfills, make sense but others, like the increase in ambulance fees, punish the unfortunate.

Despite the increases in other fees, city revenue has increased very little before this year. Table 2 shows the revenue for the city between 2001 and 2012. Between 2001 and 2011 total city revenue increased by 38%. That may seem like a large number, but it does not take into account inflation (the fact that prices go up almost every

year), which means that the city has to pay more for the goods and services that it buys each year. Table 3, which adjusts for inflation (what economists call “real” since it more accurately reflects the purchasing power of any given amount of money), shows that city revenues only went up by 8% between 2001 and 2011. It also fails to account for the fact that the population of Winnipeg has increased from 637,000 in 2001 to 693,000 in 2011. This means that the city is collecting revenue from more people, but also has more people to provide for with its services. If the increased population is accounted for, the city actually earned 0.5% less per person in real terms in 2011 than it did in 2001 (see Table 3).

Even with the increase in revenue in 2012, the city will only earn 2.5% more than it did in 2001 after adjusting for population and inflation. This overstates the city’s revenue increases since much of this increase is coming from grants from other governments and transfers from the city’s stabilization funds.

TABLE 2 City of Winnipeg Budget Revenue Comparison: 2001, 2011 Adopted; 2012 Preliminary
(All figures in millions of dollars.)

Nominal \$ millions	2001 Actual	2011 Adopted	% change 01 to 11	2012 Budget	% change 11 to 12	% change 01 to 12
Property Tax	384	435.9	13.5	459.6	5.4	19.7
Business Tax	60	57.6	-4.0	57.6	0.0	-4.0
Other Tax	19	71.7	277.4	70.1	-2.2	268.9
Government Grants	73	106.1	45.3	113.3	6.8	55.2
Regulations and Fees	18	36.5	102.8	37.6	3.0	108.9
Sales of Goods and Services	42	58.2	38.6	62.7	7.7	49.3
Interest	14	43.1	207.9	46.8	8.6	234.3
Transfers from other Funds	40	38.2	-4.5	52.3	36.9	30.8
Total	651	847.3	30.2	900.0	6.2	38.2

TABLE 3 City of Winnipeg Budget Revenue Comparison Adjusted for Inflation: 2001, 2011 Adopted; 2012 Preliminary (All figures in millions of dollars; 2008 dollars)

Nominal \$ millions	2001 Actual	2011 Adopted	% change 01 to 11	2012 Budget	% change 11 to 12	% change 01 to 12
Property Tax	441.9	417.1	-5.6	432.0	3.6	-2.2
Business Tax	69.0	55.1	-20.2	54.1	-1.8	-21.6
Other Tax	21.9	68.6	213.8	65.9	-4.0	201.3
Government Grants	84.0	101.5	20.9	106.5	4.9	26.8
Regulations and Fees	20.7	34.9	68.6	35.3	1.2	70.6
Sales of Goods and Services	48.3	55.7	15.2	58.9	5.8	21.9
Interest	16.1	41.2	156.0	44.0	6.6	173.0
Transfers from other Funds	46.0	36.6	-20.6	49.2	34.5	6.8
Total	749.1	810.8	8.2	845.9	4.3	12.9
Real Total per Person	1176.04	1169.67	-0.5	1205.97	3.1	2.5
Winnipeg Pop	637000	693200	8.8	701400	1.2	10.1
Winnipeg CMA Pop	690000	764200	10.8	773800	1.3	12.1

SOURCES: CPI 2001 = 86.9; 2007=97.6; 2008=100; 2009=100.5; 2010=101.5; 2011=104.5; 2012 =106.4
 2011 CPI increase from City of Winnipeg budget
 Population data from Conference Board of Canada, March 2011
 Other tax includes the other tax category and the frontage levy
 Budget information from page 235 of city budget 2012

This council has also displayed a lack of leadership and creativity in looking at new ways of raising revenue. Its go-to position is that the provincial and federal governments are responsible for Winnipeg's financial woes. This assertion is only partially true. Historically, the city has done reasonably well through government transfers. As table 3 shows, grants from other levels of government increased by 21% in real terms between 2001 and 2011 (the overall city revenue the increase was 8%). If we look at the changes from 2011 to 2012 in tables 2 and 3, even with the city's property tax increase this year, the 6.2% increase in total city revenue (4.3% after adjusting for expected inflation) is less than the 6.8% increase in government grants (4.9% after adjusting for expected inflation).

In fact, the city could be alleviating some of the funding pressure it faces by looking at new

ways of generating revenue; ways that would also have the added benefit of reducing pollution and urban sprawl. In the CCPA Manitoba's last Alternative Municipal Budget (2010)³, we put forward policy suggestions that would, if implemented, add up to almost \$48 million in additional revenue, while encouraging Winnipeggers to reduce their environmental footprint.

These sorts of revenue generators make much more sense than using low-income Winnipeggers as pawns in pressure tactics to get more money from the province (see section on Transit) or continuing to lift funds from other budget funds. The 2012 budget draws \$52 million from other funds, \$14 million more than in 2011, and needs every penny of that to balance its budget. This includes \$8 million from the Fiscal Stabilization Reserve Fund.

Business tax

The tax rate on businesses will not increase in 2012. Actually, there is a decline in the mill rate from 6.39 to 5.9 percent that will compensate for the increase in assessed rental value (the base on which the business tax is levied) from the 2012 reassessment. In addition, 4900 of Winnipeg's smallest businesses will not pay the business tax, a move that will save each business, on average \$800, and will cost the city \$3.9 million. The city estimates that this rebate will exactly cancel out the revenue increases from new assessable businesses in the city.

This continues that city's long term strategy of reducing the business tax. In 2001 the city earned \$60 million from the business tax, in 2012 it expects to tax in \$57.6 million, a reduction of 4% (Table 2). After adjusting for inflation, the decline is even more pronounced. In real terms the business tax will be 22% lower in 2012 than it was in 2001 (Table 3).

In 2007, the mayor's Economic Opportunity Commission (EOC) tabled several ideas to make

up for the considerable loss the city would face if and when it eliminated the business tax – its stated long-term goal. Proposals ranged from increasing the use of Public Private Partnerships to asking the province for more money⁴. In the 5 years that have passed since 2007, this council has clearly been unable to grapple with revenue shortfalls using these tactics; nor has it come up with new strategies. Nonetheless, by reducing the business tax again this year, we see that council stubbornly refuses to let go of its dream to eventually eliminate it.

The mayor continually refers to the business tax as a “job killer”. CCPA Mb. has been countering this position for years, showing that taxes are not the most important factor that businesses look at when they are deciding whether or not to invest⁵. By raising property taxes on houses and not on business, council is transferring businesses' responsibility to home owners' shoulders, even though businesses benefit tremendously from the social investment that taxes allow.

Spending Sleight-of-Hand

The budget justifies its spending decisions by referring to survey results: fully 47 per cent of those surveyed thought that crime should be a priority (up from 18.1 per cent in 2009 and 30.2 per cent in 2010). Almost 22 per cent thought roads and infrastructure were a priority (down from 32.7 per cent in 2009, but up from 11.5 per cent in 2010), and 7.1 per cent tagged transit as a priority (down from 8.1 per cent in 2009 and 11.3 per cent in 2010). These were the top three priorities Winnipeggers identified. The spending response in the Preliminary Budget is examined below.

Police and Fire Paramedic Services

Given that spending on Police and Fire Paramedic Services is the largest (41.7 per cent of total spending) and a continually growing area of spending, we need to be asking if we're getting full value for the money. Past CCPA Alternative Budgets have recommended a return to community policing and the use of crime prevention through community safety coordinators and youth inclusion programs. We see no mention of these sorts of preventative strategies in the Preliminary Budget.

As Manitoba's largest urban centre, Winnipeg is the locus of much of the criminal activity that eventually results in Manitoba's burgeoning prison populations. The human and economic costs of crime are unacceptable and it is abundantly clear that more effective, long-term strategies are required to deal with crime. A recent report by CCPA Mb. and The John Howard Society of Manitoba⁶ outlines the kinds of preventative investments that will eventually deal with the root causes of crime.

According to the city: between 2001 and 2011 spending on police and fire paramedic services increased 68%. In contrast, spending on all other public services has increased by only 19%. The 8.4% increase for police and paramedic services in the 2012 budget continues this trend, without offering a strategy for reducing crime over the long term through investment in community-based social programs.

Roads and Infrastructure

One of the more troublesome approaches this council has taken to address the lack of funds for infrastructure is to sell water and waste-wa-

ter services to ex-urban areas. This strategy not only depletes Winnipeg's tax base—by making it more attractive for residents and businesses to re-locate outside city limits—it then puts more of a burden on our road system by encouraging people to commute between bedroom communities and Winnipeg.

The city continues to dedicate large amounts of its scarce resources to building and maintaining roads of all kinds. They claim to do this because Winnipeggers want a better road system; nonetheless, a considerable number of Winnipeggers also want a better transit system. It is likely that improvements in public transit would encourage more people to leave their cars at home, thereby reducing wear and tear on existing roads and decreasing demand for new ones.

Now that the Mayor has been forced to back off on the regressive 20 cent transit fare increase, the city will find itself \$3.6 million short in its plans to complete the second leg of Rapid Transit going to the University of Manitoba. Luckily for the Mayor, we know exactly where he can find that sum of money, and more.

When Glen Murray was mayor, he set aside \$7 million for Rapid Transit. For some reason Mayor Katz offered this sum up to the private sector for the development of an indoor water park. Not only would spending public funds in this manner be a gross misuse of scarce resources, it is clearly not appealing to the private sector as no one has taken up the Mayor's offer.

It is time that this council took some definitive action and re-dedicated this \$7M to Rapid Transit. Council might also want to consider carving some money out of this amount to pay for a Low Income Bus Pass that would be available to socially-marginalized and low-income Winnipeggers. Calgary has such a pass and the results have been very encouraging, with more

people being able to access work and get to necessary appointments⁷.

There is one bright spot on the transit issue: there will be an additional 55,000 extra hours of transit service. The extra hours will make it more appealing to use public transit and those who rely on it should see an improvement in their ability to move about the city. CCPA Mb. Alternative Municipal Budgets⁸ have recommended expenditure in this area and we are pleased to see that the city is undertaking these improvements.

Nonetheless, council needs to maintain a consistent message on transit; it claims to understand the social and environmental advantages to an efficient, accessible public transit system, but it continues to pander to the car. The province has indicated repeatedly that it is willing to work with the city on Rapid Transit⁹. This commitment on behalf of the province, combined with steady, sensible leadership from the mayor would ensure that the second stage of Rapid Transit becomes a reality.

It is obviously necessary to maintain existing roads and bridges, but wear and tear would be minimized if fewer cars were on the road. Census information on page 44 of the budget indicates a worrisome trend: private vehicle use increased between 2001 and 2006, and transit use decreased in the same period. If more money were put towards building a viable public transit system, and less money towards roads (Chief Peguis Trail; Kenaston Road expansion), Winnipeg could finally encourage a meaningful transition from the private car to public transit. We need to finish Rapid Transit and implement policies that discourage car use, while raising much-needed resources. Past CCPA Mb. Alternative Municipal Budgets have discussed such policies. Our recent report on the Kenaston Road expansion¹⁰ also discusses better ways of developing our transportation infrastructure system.

Quality of Life

Winnipeg's Elm Trees

Regardless of the results of the survey (which can change dramatically from one year to the next), Winnipeggers know that it takes more than safety, roads and transit to build a city worth living in. We know from our last Alternative Budget that Winnipeggers want to “humanize our streets, buildings, waterways and iceways so we have a city that invigorates, welcomes and comforts us¹¹”. When we read the results of the OurWinnipeg project, we found that Winnipeggers had proposed innovative ideas that would make our city more equitable and greener. We elaborated on these opportunities throughout our 2010 Alternative Budget.

In spite of continued reference to the desires outlined in OurWinnipeg (see pages 25-27 in the Preliminary Budget), this council routinely overlooks opportunities to make Winnipeg more equitable, sustainable and to protect what we hold dear. There are vague commitments to “protecting our city’s natural areas and heritage resources”, but the budget allots a paltry \$250,000 increase to protecting our elm-tree forest when much more is required to make up for the neglect of the past decade. We run the very real risk of losing

this resource which brings so much economic and aesthetic value to a large swath of our city.

Winnipeg's Golf Courses

Golf Services, a Special Operating Agency (SOA) runs the seven city-owned golf courses. This year they are projected to lose \$863,000. The city has subsidized its golf courses in the past, but is threatening to open them up to private investment and development – an idea that originated with the 2007 EOC report. If this plan comes into effect, Winnipeggers will lose much more than an accessible and affordable means to golf; we will lose green space, habitat for wildlife; natural areas to hike and cross-country ski; and public parks.

Rather than seeing \$863,000 (0.096% of the total budget of \$900,000,000) as a crucial investment in maintaining Winnipeggers’ quality of life, this council insists that it must allow the private sector access to public resources, thereby restricting access to an essential component of recreation and natural space. It refuses to factor the considerable benefits, both quantifiable and otherwise, into its calculus. We strongly recom-

mend that council reconsider the course of action it has taken and commit to keeping all our golf courses publically-owned, run and available to all Winnipeggers.

Housing for Everyone

The preamble to the Preliminary Budget discusses population change and housing. The two topics are one after the other, but strangely, they do not inform each other. The section on population change rightly points out that Winnipeg is growing and that the primary source of the growth is from new immigrants. It does not talk specifically about the considerable migration of Aboriginal Manitobans to the city, nor does it discuss the challenges both new immigrants and Aboriginal migrants can face trying to find decent housing.

The short discussion on housing in Winnipeg only considers the availability and price of home ownership. It does not consider that fully 37.3% of Winnipeg tenant-occupied households

spent more than 30% of their income on housing (putting them in core-housing need)¹². It does not consider that as of October 2011, Winnipeg's vacancy rate was 1.1%¹³, making it close to impossible for many newcomers to find a decent place to live.

In spite of Winnipeg's growing population and shrinking rental market, this year's budget does not dedicate nearly enough money in this crucial area. The transfer to the Housing Rehabilitation Investment Reserve remains at \$1 million, where it's been for several years in spite of the growing housing crisis. In keeping with its Call to Action, the city needs to work in partnership with the provincial government and investigate a citywide pilot grant program to support the creation of affordable housing units. These units would be part of larger developments and would provide developers with tax incentives¹⁴. The city also has to look at a variety of policy options from other municipalities; options that deal creatively with the same housing challenges facing Winnipeg¹⁵.

Madly Off in All Directions

While it is indeed true that the city faces daunting revenue problems, it is also true that there is a decided lack of leadership in staring those problems down. Council's refusal to raise property taxes before this year and its insistence in reducing the business tax means that our revenue problems are worse than they should be. There are ways to raise revenue, ways that also reduce environmentally damaging behaviour, but instead council insists on looking to the private sector for quick fixes, such as Public Private Partnerships, when evidence shows that these arrangements favour the private sector much more than the public⁶. Even when financial help is made available (as it has been by the province), council is unable to take decisive action on Rapid Transit. In spite of its commitment to the values expressed in OurWinnipeg, council remains fixated on expanding car infrastructure, even though there is not enough money to maintain our existing transportation system. And the newest strategy to sell services to ex-urban areas means that our infrastructure commitment will increase, while our tax revenues go down.

Winnipeggers need to consider more than what money gets spent on; they need to ask *how* the money gets spent. Is it more efficient to spend on police, or should we be spending more on *preventing* crime? Should scarce resources be dedicated to roadway expansion, or public transit?

Once again, OurWinnipeg provides a wealth of insights on what direction Winnipeggers want our city to take. The city has obviously understood those insights, and correctly asks the following questions on page 26:

- How are we going to accommodate growth and change?
- How do we capitalize on growth while making sure our city stays livable, affordable and desirable?
- How do we make sure that all Winnipeggers benefit from this growth?
- How do we maintain and enrich what we value while finding room for a growing population?

Unfortunately the preliminary budget then goes off madly in all directions rather than adopting a comprehensive set of policies that would address

these issues. The following actions demonstrate how this budget contradicts itself:

- It raises property taxes, then lowers business taxes;
- It spends more on policing and less on programs that would reduce crime over the long run;
- It encourages population growth, then ignores the housing needs of vulnerable newcomers;
- It pays lip service to Rapid Transit, then refuses to allocate funds from other levels of government to pay for it;
- It claims to want a comprehensive public transit system, then allocates funds to new roadways;
- It claims to understand that “quality of life goes beyond the basics¹⁷” and the need to

“... provid[e] a range of options for living, working and playing¹⁸”, then underfunds recreation, public golf courses and the protection of our invaluable elm tree forest.

The budget preamble wisely states that “the whole system has to work together efficiently and sustainably¹⁹”, but the budget itself delivers policies that pit transit against cars; business against home owners; private sector against public; inner city against the suburbs; city against the province and commerce against culture and the environment. It doesn’t have to be this way.

We need a budget that allows all departments and levels of government to work together to make Winnipeg a city that works, is sustainable and has a high quality of life.²⁰

The 2012 preliminary operating budget identifies these goals; maybe next year it will set a course to realize them.

Endnotes

- 1 <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/manitoba/story/2010/10/12/mb-katz-negative-campaign-winnipeg.html>
- 2 Winnipeg Free Press, February 28, 2012.
- 3 CCPA Mb., 2010.
- 4 CCPA Mb. 2008, pages 14-18.
- 5 CCPA Mb., 2005; CCPA Mb., 2008.
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- 7 CCPA Mb. 2012a.
- 8 CCPA Mb. 2009; CCPA Mb. 2010.
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- 10 CCPA Mb. 2012b.
- 11 CCPA Mb. 2010, page 1.
- 12 City of Winnipeg 2006.
- 13 CMHC, 2011.
- 14 CCPA Mb. 2010 Alternative Municipal Budget, page 24.
- 15 Ibid, pages 22-25.
- 16 CCPA Mb. 2008, pages 8-9.
- 17 City of Winnipeg 2012, page 26.
- 18 Ibid.
- 19 Ibid.
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