

Administration must take budget input seriously

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About thirteen thousand Torontonians invested hours working through solutions to address the City's fiscal woes. Their conclusions, if coupled with sensible implementation from City staff and Council, would make a solid vision for financial stability.

But aside from a few points taken out of context, no Member of Council and very few members of the media paid the slightest attention.

That's a shame, because their ideas offer excellent guidance on most of the key decision points. It is certainly a more constructive approach than the collective hysteria that is presently replacing discussion on the budget.

Participants started by ranking their own priorities. At the top they placed infrastructure such as roads, transit and water, and meeting the needs of the vulnerable. They were less concerned about the tax rate.

Thinking about City services, they attached the greatest importance to transit, safe water and emergency services. Sitting at the bottom of the list were city run theatres, zoos and Exhibition Place.

When asked about paying for municipal services, they chose higher taxes and user fees if necessary.

Participants strongly supported public delivery for emergency services, the police and public health. A majority did not care whether programs such as the Exhibition, zoo or Parking Services even stayed within the City.

Then they were asked whether it mattered whether the municipality should deliver certain services itself, or whether we ought to seek better value elsewhere. Sensibly, functions such as policy-making, financial services and human resources were thought best run by City staff.

On the other hand, participants recommended that Council evaluate external options for maintenance, repair, cleaning, security, and information technology. These ideas naturally lead to opportunities for savings by consolidating or outsourcing other central services such as purchasing, legal advice and accounting.

Millions are spent annually on these functions, so there is potential for significant savings without impacting front line services.

Participants recognized Council would need to make difficult divestment decisions. For example it would need to show a commitment to keeping culture alive without owning theatres or zoos, or assuring small merchants that they will not go bankrupt if the City no longer owns a parking business.

Nevertheless, participants gave clear directions that could be turned into consistent, practical policies. Even better, their changes would probably achieve financial stability. Priority services, as defined by 13 000 of our neighbours, will largely be preserved.

Mission accomplished?

Up to a point.

Achieving financial viability with minimal impact to end users means trampling all over the carefully guarded turf at City Hall. Every employee, manager and interest group will feel threatened.

The public will be treated to apocalyptic stories. Councillors will be subjected to intense lobbying. Supporters from programs at risk will be found in Councillors' wards or among friends. Negative campaign literature will be circulated in select neighbourhoods.

Faced with months of such unpleasantness, it is human nature to seek less painful solutions.

The easiest option is to completely abdicate responsibility. We can expect a number of Councillors not to support any change. It is not only painless, it allows Members to pin responsibility on the Administration. It is, however, irresponsible.

Those wanting the wide ranging changes necessary for long term viability are left with political problems. Usually it falls to the Mayor to articulate a comprehensive, inspiring vision, and to play the long game.

In this case we see no interest in the issues of governance, although there is a desire to reduce the size and cost of City government.

As a result, those on the side of change do not have an overall approach, but are simply left with balancing the budget.

This situation is very different than the opening premise of reducing cost without impacting core services. The calculation now changes to influencing enough supporters to achieve a balanced budget.

Political handlers will seek to have the fewest number of votes, made in the shortest time, that impacts the least number of supporters. For example, it is far

easier to shut down selected library branches than to squeeze equivalent savings from outsourcing or centralizing library internal functions, especially when challenged by a hostile Library Board.

So that is why we are where we are. Without a constructive vision, and faced with seemingly unlimited capricious cuts, there is no wonder that the level of anxiety is so high.

Consider for a moment that Mayor Ford campaign achieved his mandate and a record turnout on the basis of reduced costs with preserved core services. Consider also that 13 000 residents provided a roadmap on how to achieve his goal.

The Administration can respect electors, taxpayers and residents by taking the recommendations of budget sessions seriously.