

John Tory's Valentine's budget lacks heart: Opinion ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Valentine's Day is a time when people show love for partners, families, friends and neighbours.

It is ironic, therefore, that Toronto Mayor John Tory and City Council are poised to approve — in the middle of Valentine's Week — a budget that is sorely lacking in heart.

Love requires honesty — and Mayor Tory deserves credit for recognizing the need to reinvest in Toronto to building a more compassionate city.

His proposed budget includes an increase to the municipal land transfer tax, which has helped avoid cuts to child care and homelessness prevention programs. And council's proposed road tolls — had they not been rejected by the premier — would have helped to close the funding gap for roads and transit.

But, overall, the city's proposed budget fails to make life better for most individuals and families. In fact, it makes life more difficult.

Consider how the budget impacts a single mother of two girls — let's call her Rina — living in an apartment in south Etobicoke.

First, it will make her family's life more expensive, due to TTC fares hikes and swimming and sports program fee increases.

Second, it will make it more difficult for Rina to secure a spot in recreation programs for her daughters. The wait-list for such programs has increased from 115,000 to 189,000 over the past three years, and with 110 recreation worker positions cut in the current budget, finding a spot won't get easier.

Third, Rina's struggle to find good quality child care for her younger daughter Maya will continue. Maya has been on the wait-list for subsidized child care for two years, but with 18,000 other children on the list — and only 300 new subsidies in the proposed budget — Maya may not receive a subsidy for years to come.

Finally, Rina works as a cleaner, and as her salary is only slightly above minimum wage, so she qualifies for subsidized housing, a support that would reduce her financial stress greatly. But she has been on the housing wait-list for three years, and is unlikely to access a unit soon, as the city budget won't even start to reduce the 97,500 household wait-list for subsidized housing until at least 2020.

One can contrast Rina and her daughters' situation with that of another family living in a house in her neighbourhood.

For their home, which is assessed at \$600,000, the family will pay about \$8 more a month in property tax in 2017. Meanwhile, their house will likely appreciate in value by \$50,000 to \$100,000 in the coming year, adding a cushion of wealth for their future.

Rina, like most renters in the city, has no savings at all, and given the increased cost of food, clothing and other basics, she is constantly worried about whether she will be able to continue to pay her monthly rent.

Is there a way that Mayor Tory and City Council could make their Valentine's budget more supportive of the many Toronto residents like Rina who are struggling to get by?

There are several options.

Mayor and Council could ask the average homeowner to pay an additional \$8 a month in property tax in 2017, allowing the city to fund child care subsidies for up to 1,000 more children, rent supplements for 2,000 more families, and affordable rental housing for 500 additional families — all big steps toward addressing the unacceptably long wait-lists for these supports.

Or, since tolls are off the table, mayor and council could reintroduce a \$60 vehicle registration tax — at a far lower cost to drivers — which could fund a reduction in TTC fares and help deal with the overcrowding and service reductions plaguing riders on more than 60 bus and streetcar routes.

Finally, council could back away from the now largely unfunded — and increasingly costly — \$3.6 billion Gardiner East rebuild, and use the

savings to fund the expansion of light rail and subways, which would do more to reduce congestion, and improve air quality and mobility.

Budgets are about choices. By unanimously adopting the city's first-ever poverty reduction strategy in 2015, Mayor Tory and council signalled their commitment to improve access to basic services like transit, housing, child care and recreation.

The proposed budget — which hikes transit and program fees and leaves hundreds of thousands of people stranded on wait lists for housing, child care, recreation and long-term care programs — is not consistent with that commitment.

Mayor Tory and council should look into their hearts this Valentine's Day, and deliver a budget that actually improves people's lives, and helps to build a city that is inclusive and supportive of all.

Michael Polanyi is a community development worker at the Children's Aid Society of Toronto. Leila Sarangi is program manager at Women's Habitat of Etobicoke. Both are members of the Commitment 2 Community Coalition, which is organizing a Have a Heart Pre-Budget Rally at City Hall on Wednesday.

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