

Competing budget narratives expected as 2017 numbers finalized this week ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

When council meets Wednesday there will be a clear divide on how the story of the 2017 budget will be told.

Is it, as Mayor John Tory and allies say, full of historic investments with unprecedented spending on poverty reduction?

Or, is it as council critics and advocates for vulnerable groups suggest a budget that remains unfair and unsustainable, leaving those marginalized bearing the brunt of the cost?

What's clear is that property taxes are unlikely to rise above 2 per cent, or less than the rate of inflation, as dictated by Tory — who promised during the campaign to do as much — and backed by both budget committee and his hand-picked executive.

Meanwhile, left-leaning councillors continue to point out that this budget does little to tackle the waitlist for affordable housing or childcare — 180,000 and 18,000 strong respectively — while raising user fees for city-run recreation programs and transit which low-income families rely on.

As angry ratepayers packed a North York banquet hall this week to protest rising Toronto property taxes, faith leaders and social activists staged events of their own to decry spiking user fees, long wait lists for recreation and child care and more.

In his Empire Club of Canada speech Tuesday, Tory once again tried to leverage the province's recent rejection of tolls to get more money for everything else.

Among other things, Tory wants the province to match pending infrastructure funds from the federal government and expects them to help pay for both the Don Valley Parkway and the Gardiner Expressway with a more than \$2 billion bill for upkeep. He did not present alternative options for raising capital funds required to finance \$33 billion worth of unfunded projects.

The city is poised to approve a \$12.3-billion operating budget and \$39.7 billion, 10-year capital budget plan Wednesday.

Here are highlights of items still up for debate:

Childcare: After continued pressure for parents and advocates, the city reversed a decision to cut grants towards rent for daycares inside Toronto District School Board locations that kept costs lower for those parents. Tory has also backed 300 childcare subsidies, though critics have argued it does little to dent the waitlist.

Housing and shelters: While the city is funding 200 new shelter beds in 2017, advocates have brought attention to the proposed elimination of 12 frontline worker positions when those employees leave or retire. With shelters beyond approved capacities and rental costs rising across Toronto, frontline supports are seen as a lifeline for those who rely on shelters. A motion is expected to recommend restoring that \$1.47 million cut. Proposed cuts to the Adelaide Resource Centre for women, from which eight city staff were expected to be redeployed, were earlier reversed and are not expected to be cut by council.

Animal services: For the first time, the city is considering giving money to the Toronto Wildlife Centre, which relies on donations to do rescues and rehabilitations — work regularly referred from the city. The centre is planning to build a permanent facility in the Rouge National Urban Park with their current site slated for demolition. The proposed budget includes a one-time grant of \$750,000 towards the new centre from a fund for the redevelopment for the nearby former Beare Rd. landfill.

Parks and recreation: A fight over school pool funding is expected as school board trustees rile up local residents worried about potential closures. City staff proposed relocating programs from three schools to other city facilities nearby in order to save a net \$261,000 in leasing costs paid to the school board while maintaining programming. The TDSB says they will be hard-pressed to maintain operations without the city funding. The city has previously relocated programs from 11 school pools and none have closed. A previously unsuccessful motion to maintain city programming at Duke of Connaught Public School in Leslieville is expected to be revived at council. Meanwhile

user fees for some city recreation programs are set to increase, in several categories beyond the rate of inflation.

Transit investments and fares: While the mayor says the city is spending \$80 million in TTC investments, critics have pointed out several of those initiatives, such as money for new buses, only maintain the status quo by replacing an aging fleet — not adding service to existing to crowded bus routes. Meanwhile, fares are budgeted to increase for the sixth straight year, with non-cash fares going up by 10 cents per ride.

Poverty reduction: Mayor John Tory has trumpeted \$185 million in spending on poverty reduction initiatives. Unfunded, however, are two planned youth hubs in libraries in Jamestown and at Bathurst St. and Lawrence Ave. The total cost is \$387,000. Councillor Pam McConnell, Tory's point person on poverty reduction, is expected to make a Tory-supported motion that will ensure the hubs — free after-school homework help for teen students — are created.

Salaries: Mayor John Tory and the 44 city councillors are poised to approve a 2.1 per cent pay increase for themselves. Retroactive to January, it will boost Tory's annual salary to \$188,544 while councillors will collect \$111,955. Councillor Michael Ford, however, plans to ask his colleagues to forego the raises, along with all city management and non-union staff. The savings would be plowed into Toronto Community Housing repairs, the backlog in child-care subsidies and TTC capital improvements.

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