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Presentation to Executive Policy Committee
March 17, 2008

Mayor Katz, Members of Executive Policy Committee,

As I said last year and I repeat it again, the budget process in 2008 stinks.

With a three-week timeline, the public continues to be excluded from providing input into the proposed budget.

Last year, I said: "Former mayors Susan Thompson and Glen Murray encouraged residents to state their spending priorities before the administration began number-crunching."

The public continues to have no role in the four budgets since Mayor Katz was first elected in the summer of 2004.

Overall, there's a continuing concern that City Hall is not listening to its citizens nor providing meaningful paths for their input.

The convoluted process of the civic budget offers minimal opportunity for citizens to engage in meaningful debate with their elected officials.

Now this year at least, CUPE 500 and the Winnipeg Labour Council held eight neighbourhood meetings to try and ascertain Winnipeg citizens' concerns, criticisms and vision for the city as a whole.

Averaging 40 to 50 concerned citizens per Town Hall meeting, concerns raised by these citizens included unfair distribution of the tax system, high cost of public private partnerships, lack of transparency and citizen engagement.

With regard to the substance of the 2008 budget, I obviously oppose public funding being slashed from $500,000 to $100,000 for public art in 2008.

As identified in the Winnipeg public art policy, "public art reflects the identity of a city, gives voice to community, and builds relationships between diverse groups. Public art gives meaning to place by interpreting the social, cultural, historical and natural environment."

As the Winnipeg Free Press said: "Public art can make the difference between an interesting and creative city and one that is merely functional and utilitarian. Public art also provides work for artists while enhancing the overall quality of life in a community."

It seems that councillors have fallen into the trap of accepting Winnipeg Sun columnist Tom Brodbeck's attack on public art as a waste of taxpayers' money. That doesn't take

into account that public art belongs to all the citizens of Winnipeg. Unlike "private art" – where an artist does a work for one person – public art is accessible to all Winnipeggers. For instance, Wolseley residents were consulted about the nature of an art installation in Vimy Ridge Park. The artist involved the community extensively and the final product reflected what they wanted.

The second area of concern to me is the cut of nearly six full-time-equivalent positions in community development and recreation.

For once, I read with enthusiasm that Community Services, in conjunction with the Winnipeg Police Service were studying providing additional staff and support for inner city community centres as a means of fighting youth crime, including gang activity.

If you're cutting staff, how can you implement that plan?

I remember being a coach and a volunteer for the West End Community Centre (now called Burton Cummings) in the 1960s. How important were community centres then? At that time, they were the centre of recreation and leisure activities. Everyone congregated at the community centres, including families and kids on sports teams.

Everyone walked to their local community centres. No one took a car as they do today. In fact, I can remember during the 1966-67 period chaperoning Friday night teen dances where over 400 kids packed the community centre listening to Chad Allen and the Expressions, (the group which became the Guess Who.) Every other community centre had similar bands, including the Devrons.

But even more important, community centres were decentralized, whether they were big or small. The city paid for a program director and a janitor for each of the community centres. The program director, in conjunction with the board of directors (volunteers) developed programs for that community centre. Different centres had different programs, depending on the needs of the particular community.

The significance of a paid program director was that the person was professionally paid to develop recreation programming. He or she would work with the board of directors and say which programs were best for that particular community centre and who needed to be hired to make that program successful.

The devaluation of inner city community centres began in 1975 when they were centralized. Program directors and other staff were abolished. A central body was set up by the city to allocate money to each centre based on the size and the programming of the centre.

Insofar as future budgets are concerned, it is important to note that the preamble to the 2008 operating budget states that the financial plans for 2009 and 2010 remain in significant shortfall positions -- $38.4 million in 2009 projection and $55.4 million for 2010. This is without eliminating the business tax.

The budget states: "Further work, including alternative delivery mechanisms and new revenue streams, will be required to implement creative solutions."

What does that mean?

Without increased provincial funding, which seems unlikely, City Council will have to raise property taxes. Could it raise taxes enough to cover that size of deficit? That seems unlikely.

While the Mayor's Economic Opportunities Commission recommendations are not being implemented in 2008, a lot of them will have to be adopted in 2009 and 2010.

The Mayor's EOC report suggested $20 million could be saved through public/private partnerships. $5 million of that would come from turning over swimming pools and recreation centres to volunteers or contracting them out. Every study shows contracting out ends up costing much more to the taxpayer in the end.

The EOC recommends offloading a number of services to neighbourhood associations including pools, play structures, park maintenance, street cleaning and a number of other services which they didn't define.

The suggestion that the neighbourhood associations take over and pay for these services is nonsensical.

Other savings recommended in the EOC report that may be included in the 2009 budget include tendering out the management of golf courses, as well as offloading the costs of certain city services in commercial districts, including street cleaning and enforcement of the anti-panhandling bylaw. These would be taken over by members of Business Improvement Zones. The final one is the use of volunteers instead of paid professionals in public libraries.

Quite bluntly, as well as other citizens, I reject those proposals presented in the EOC report. I don't want to see more civic services contracted out. I see public-private partnerships as transfers of public assets to private interests.