# CUPE Local 500

## Speaking Notes to Executive Policy Committee

## Re: 2009 Operating Budget – City of Winnipeg

March 11, 2009

**CUPE LOCAL 500 SPEAKING NOTES SUBMITTED TO EXECUTIVE POLICY COMMITTEE – MARCH 11, 2009**

**RE: 2009 OPERATING BUDGET, CITY OF WINNIPEG**

Your Worship, Councillors, thank you for the opportunity to speak to you regarding the 2009 operating budget.

As you all know, I represent City workers who are the frontline delivery agents of the city services funded from this budget. CUPE members are the people who know first hand what the citizen's of Winnipeg want and how they rely on City services.

So when we comment on the 2009 Operating Budget, it's from the point of view of loyal employees, frontline delivery agents, taxpayers and citizens of Winnipeg. When we comment on the budget we are passing on the views of Winnipeggers who we meet a thousand times a day, every day of the week. And therefore, we can't comment on the city budget objectively because we know how every dollar of the budget affects individual citizens of this great city, either positively or negatively.

There are merits in this budget:

- In the budget context, there is a commitment to maintaining service levels;
- The commitment to updating Plan Winnipeg is important and we look forward to contributing to the consultations leading up to the new plan;
- There are some new positions identified in the budget, which is not going to compensate for the hundreds of jobs lost over the last five years, but is a step in the right direction;
- There are some budget increases that we certainly agree with. The $12.4 million for police and fire paramedics is important and will improve services. The increase for public transit will benefit all passengers;

- And we think it is important that there is a recognition that property taxes have to increase, and that increases will be coming soon.

However, we have some concerns that we think important to express:

Others making presentations to you and to Council next week will talk about the limited time we have for consultation and getting public input. They will talk about the difficulty in reading and interpreting the budget. We think these are valid concerns and we hope you will recognize they reflect the desire to be part of this important civic exercise and that we have something valuable to contribute to the budget planning process.

Where we have other concerns though, is in the budgetary shifts that could indicate some reduction in services. Generally speaking, we see almost twenty million dollars in fee increases and program reductions that could be interpreted to mean restrictions in service for the public. Note for example:

- Snow Removal. There is a projected reduction of about $1.4 million for removing snow from local and regional streets. Considering that some streets now do not get sufficient attention, these reductions will only increase the inconveniences motorists and pedestrians face every winter. This is particularly true for senior citizens and disabled people who are often shut in their homes because of snow on city streets.

- Another example, bridge and road maintenance. A million dollar reduction does not seem like a lot until we recognize that we have underfunded maintenance for the last five years and there are now more streets to service. The infrastructure deficit will only increase more if we do not allocate sufficient amounts to look after the infrastructure we now have.

- Community Policing. Again it may seem that a 3.7 percent decrease in funding to put police services into our neighbourhoods is not a lot until we admit that this form of policing is extremely effective in preventing crime and thus avoiding major costs for the criminal justice system later on. There should be an increase in funding, not a decrease.

- To pay for some of these increases, the budget indicates about $40 million will come from reserve funds. In principle this is okay. In this budget, taking this money for operations, only covers up the need for a major change in the budget – the need for a major increase in revenue.

In each of these budgetary lines, we know the impact on our citizens. In each case, it is Winnipeggers who will pay the price of reduced services. It is the young, the elderly, families, women and new immigrants who lose the services when funds are reduced or if personnel are reduced. Increasingly, it is the middle class who are finding it harder to maintain a quality of urban life that allows them to maintain their homes, educate their children and provide the social guidance needed to be good future citizens.

So this year we strongly suggest that the city does three things:

- First, start a gradual and incremental increase in property taxes. Our studies have shown that Winnipeggers are willing to consider tax increases if they see improvements in services and the wise use of their tax dollars. Starting the increase now will soften the load for taxpayers.
- Second, adopt principles and elements of the Alternative City Budget prepared by CCPA last fall. The direction proposed and the specific recommendations in this alternative vision for a budget are a reasonable approach to raising revenue and wisely allocating public resources for city services.

- And third, reverse the thinking that seems to guide city decisions now – that the private sector is better able to provide quality public services than the public sector. The experience all across Canada is that private delivery of public services or the privatization of public infrastructure is not working. Public sector workers, with the guidance of progressive political leaders, have been proven again and again as the best people to deliver public services.

In conclusion, I think it is appropriate to tie our comments on the 2009 budget to what is happening to our economy now. All across the world, but particularly in the United States and Canada, there is a renewed confidence in government intervention in the economy. Business, community and labour leaders are calling for more government spending on public infrastructure and programs to respond to the global crisis and provide the stimuli needed for economic growth. These measures are recognized as important contributors to our economic survival.

Winnipeg should join this trend and be part of a national stimulus initiative. Instead of proposing the status quo with some minor adjustments, the operating budget should be boldly taking on the challenges of a modern city, investing in its people, adopting environmental principles as economic assets and providing the visionary leadership that only a city government can do.

As public sector workers, we are prepared to do our part to meet the needs of Winnipeggers. As city employees we are prepared to put in the extra effort needed to address serious economic, environment and social issues facing the city government. But to do so, we need city policies and financial resources to do so effectively.

Thank you again.
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