Winnipeg Committee for Safety

510 Main Street, Winnipeg, MB R3B 1B9
Telephone - (204) 899-7595
Email - wcfscoordinator@winnipeg.ca

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RE: Preliminary 2024-2027 Multi-Year Balanced Budget

Hello Council Members,

The Winnipeg Committee for Safety (WCFS) is pleased to offer feedback and recommendations to Council regarding the City of Winnipeg's Preliminary 2024-2027 Multi-Year Balanced Budget. We are heartened that Council is focused on building a safe, healthy, and happy city that supports the well-being of all residents by making city services more available, accessible, and affordable. A plan that supports reconciliation, poverty reduction, recreation, and advocating to and partnering with governments on shared goals will build a stronger city. It is impressive to see how these budget priorities align with the Council's 2023-2026 Strategic Priorities Action Plan (SPAP).

In 2023 Council approved the WCFS Strategic Plan for 2023 – 2027. Based on a review and stakeholder consultation process, we identified five priorities important to Winnipeg citizens for the work we will focus on:

- Homelessness/Houselessness
- Substance Use Challenges
- Built Environment and Public Transportation
- Lack of Activities/Opportunities
- Mental Health Challenges

We used these identified priorities to reach alignment with the corresponding budget items. The following feedback relates to these priorities:

Lack of Activities/Opportunities

What we like:
Increased funding for extended library hours and a new northwest library, parks and recreation, safe spaces, mobile outreach, and Downtown Y youth programming increases opportunities for many, especially youth. Community input told us that inclusive spaces and activities for youth, especially those experiencing marginalization, was a key concern.

The Community Incentive Grant program helps communities work on priorities important to them, often involving community safety and wellbeing. These funds will be utilized by neighbourhood organizations that rely on volunteer efforts to operate programs, projects and services that provide the city far more value than just the program fund amount. Improved engagement and generation of new ideas for the community also flourish where these resources are available.

What we would like to see more of:
While it is unfortunate to see wading pools close, the construction of new spray pads, and the decision-making parameters around their location, is a better alternative. We hope Council will look to add more spray pad locations in the future, especially in areas with higher needs. **I.E.** Two spray pads (North Point Douglas and Turtle Island) for the entire North End are not enough to accommodate an area with such a large population of children.
We also encourage Council to explore all possible alternatives for swimming pool closures. If not yet at the end of their lifespan, it's possible those locations could find renewed use and value through promoting their offerings and availability to folks who have not visited them yet.

Built Environment and Public Transportation

What we like:
It is wonderful to see the new Community Safety Team already in operation and making positive strides to improve safety for bus riders. Monies for Pedestrian and Cycling programs, as well as Road Safety improvements will make our streets safer for all road users.

What we would like you to consider:
Freezing the Winnpass cost at the 2024 rate is helpful to some in terms of stable and affordable bus travel cost, but it must be noted that some users who rely on transit cannot afford the total outlay for a pass, so instead purchase tickets as needed at a greater cost. It would be beneficial for the City to look at how low-income users can best afford these purchases. Being able to comfortably pay the fare could reduce confrontations with the driver and make for a safer bus environment.

Homelessness, Substance Use Challenges and Mental Health Challenges

What we like:
Funding for the creation of a community safety, well-being, and crime prevention action plan is vital. We look forward to this work getting underway and hope the WCFS will play a role in these plans.
We are encouraged by plans that will improve safety such as the Next Gen 911 implementation and a commitment to reduced 311 call waiting times. Continued support for the Downtown Community Safety Partnership and public washroom operation, as well as downtown revitalization plans that focus on housing and cleanliness will help address many issues the heart of our city struggles with.

What we are concerned about:
The repercussions of not fully funding the Poverty Reduction Strategy and the Newcomer Welcome & Inclusion Plan. It is our belief these two key initiatives will improve community safety and well-being and should be fully funded. Poverty is the biggest risk factor related to substance use, mental health issues and homelessness. The relationship between poverty and crime is well-documented. When there is the lack of a safety net, an individual will create their own, and that will usually be through crime. It will even be through violent crime if necessary. With a Crime Severity Index (2022) for violent crimes that is double the level of some other Canadian cities (I.E. Calgary), we must adequately resource all avenues that will lead to a safer city.

While it may not be possible to eliminate poverty, governments at all levels can work together to provide resources to help people meet their basic needs and narrow socioeconomic gaps. We encourage Council to consider the financial burden poverty and its related risk factors causes the City. Directing funds and resources to meet the basic needs of those who require support will eventually lead to lower costs for things like policing, EMS, by-law enforcement and social and health services, and will eventually increase employment and economic growth. We know it is not an easy fix, but we think it makes business sense.

By-law enforcement

In response to Council's SPAP, the WCFS recommended that Council increase staffing of by-law enforcement officers by at least 25 per cent, as well as undertaking community education in neighbourhoods where by-law infractions are highest. We felt this could also include education for non-resident property owners in those areas.

The preliminary budget does a good job of comparisons between what Winnipeg and other Canadian municipalities spend on by-law enforcement, with Winnipeg spending only $477,533.00 compared to the Canadian average of $779,582.00. We are asking Council to bring funding for by-law enforcement services in line with other cities. Another area of the budget notes that Winnipeg continues to experience more serious building fires compared to other Canadian cities. We believe that funding by-law services to a more robust level would reduce many issues related to building fires, as well as other safety issues.

The WCFS congratulates Council for their work to create this preliminary budget and thanks Council for the opportunity to provide feedback and recommendations. Our committee looks forward to the opportunity to support the implementation of these plans.