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Transit plan poses sticky problem for councillors

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The problems city council faces in getting its operating budget under control spill over into the capital budget: How does the city convince taxpayers to start a \$4.7-billion transit expansion when it is faced with cutting child care, arts festivals and outdoor rinks?

Last Wednesday, the city presented its draft 2009 capital budget, but half of that budget was missing. The projects listed so far total \$314 million, roughly half of which is road projects.

There is also a separate water and sewer budget that will include upgrades to the sewer system.

But the rest of the budget will only be settled once councillors decide how to begin a 23-year project to build rail to the outer limits of urban Ottawa and beyond. That debate starts Monday.

As it stands, the capital budget includes \$157 million in new roads. Other projects include \$41 million for parks and recreation, \$30 million for fire, paramedic and emergency-measures projects, \$14.5 million for library projects and \$12 million for environment projects.

All this spending will be dwarfed by the new transit plan, for which the city is supposed to enlist the financial support of the federal and provincial governments. Building the system is expected to cost \$1.4 billion over the next 10 years.

Alta Vista Councillor Peter Hume says the immediate financial woes, versus the grand vision of a big new transit plan, "is a stark contrast that the public will find challenging." Mr. Hume said the city is pressured, often by residents of new communities, to build roads and community buildings. But he said the first priority for capital spending should be the preservation of existing public assets.

Baseline Councillor Rick Chiarelli said the financial troubles of the city could lead to delays in the new transit plan, such as not building the downtown tunnel as quickly as hoped.

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