

My wish list for council for 2005;; [Final Edition]

[Randall Denley](#). [The Ottawa Citizen](#). Ottawa, Ont.: [Jan 4, 2005](#). pg. B.1.Fro

A workable budget; re-think the O-Train; follow Hume's lead

After 150 years, one would think we would have started to get the hang of making our city work, but there's still lots of room for improvement. Here are three things Ottawa councillors and senior bureaucrats need to tackle this year:

First is the budget, but I don't mean this year's budget, which will be another cobbled together effort with a tax increase that's too high, but still inadequate to meet the actual increase in costs. If staff's advice is followed, the difference will be made up by using money that was really intended for the city's chronically cash- short capital program. The main alternative will be to raise the tax increase even higher.

The thing that ought to scare councillors, and the public, is the staff projection of tax increases of 8.5 per cent next year and 7.7 per cent the year after. This is easily double the maximum acceptable tax increase, but neither councillors nor staff have any real plan to deal with the problem. Do councillors really want to face the public in 2006 after raising taxes eight per cent?

So far, the people who run City Hall have settled for pointing to the cost pressures they face, and the big tax increases in other cities. None of this is a substitute for action. They have lost the discipline that came with tax freezes, and there is no new target to provide control. Councillors need to set a tax increase goal now, for next year, of no more than the rate of inflation. To achieve that, they must control city labour costs and narrow the scope of what the city does. Those aren't things that can be accomplished during a budget discussion. If councillors want a tax increase number that will let them keep their jobs in 2006, and get that 25- per-cent raise, they need to start now.

The other thing that tops the money list is finally getting a grasp on the real costs of the O-Train. We know that \$600 million will build part of the new rail system, but councillors have avoided dealing with the operating costs. Consultants' reports being done now should give us an idea of that operating cost by early spring. That's the time to pause and ask if the city can really afford to operate a substantial light-rail system.

City ratepayers will subsidize transit by \$127 million this year, up \$17 million over last. The city's long-term plan calls for a near doubling of the percentage of people taking transit over the next 20 years. Much of that ridership growth is supposed to come from the O- Train, but where will the subsidy money come from? It's also worth noting that the city's predictions of big ridership growth aren't coming true. The plan called for 93 million customer trips last year. The real total will be nearly five million less.

The O-Train seems to have a life of its own, but if councillors don't stop to ask do we need it, and can we afford it, we will all have many years to look back in regret.

Finally, I would challenge councillors to each produce one demonstrable personal accomplishment this year, and point to Councillor Peter Hume as an example.

Hume and people in the **Canterbury** area wanted to expand and upgrade the **Canterbury** Community Centre, a nearly 40-year-old complex that includes a hockey rink, a pool and sportsfields. The goal was to provide more meeting rooms, air conditioning, and office space for community sports teams. While the \$2.25-million project is fairly modest, it would have taken 10 to 15 years to rise to the top of the city's capital spending list, says Hume.

Instead of waiting, residents, the community association and a coalition of sports groups have decided to bear most of the cost themselves. The two community

groups will donate \$350,000 to the project, and \$1.45 million will come from a special levy that will cost area homeowners just under \$10 a year for 10 years. The city will pay the rest from development charges.

Thanks to Hume's initiative, his residents will get a better community centre at a modest cost to themselves. It's an attractive alternative to listening to government explain why necessary community improvements can't be done. Work is to start in June.

Three things in 12 months. That doesn't sound too difficult. Last April, I wrote a column suggesting six things councillors should tackle in the next six months. They dealt with one, a budget that is actually intelligible to the public. I think that halving the to-do list and doubling the amount of time ought to increase their chances of success. But I'm an incurable optimist.

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