

'Not a real budget for us': Councillors slam Winnipeg's 'fundamentally flawed' budget process

Sean Kavanagh · CBC News · Posted: Mar 13, 2019 2:13 PM CT | Last Updated: March 13

3 councillors say time for review and consultation has been inadequate, want budget process reworked. The city is in the midst of what the mayor describes as "the most challenging budget" he's faced since getting into politics.

A \$40-million shortfall in capital grants from the province in the previous budget year has left a gaping hole in funding for this year's road improvements, while support from Manitoba for the city's operating expenses has been frozen at 2016 levels, creating further fiscal pressure.

Lukes acknowledges the city is facing challenges, but says it's time to upend the budget process at city hall — something she says hasn't been done in more than 20 years. "This budget was crafted by eight councillors and the mayor. The rest of us [remaining seven councillors] have had no input. How is this collaboration?" Lukes said.

Lukes says some project funding in the budget violates city council policy, and getting answers on issues in the document comes back with scant time to review and consider what is being spent.

Review coming, says Gillingham

Finance chair Scott Gillingham told Lukes at a meeting of council's executive policy committee the city's chief operating officer will spearhead a strategic planning initiative to revamp the budget process, which will involve all councillors. "We really want to get everyone around the table," Gillingham said.

Lukes welcomed any plan "to lift the veil of secrecy here at city hall," but with a note of skepticism. "Actions speak louder than words," Lukes said.

As Bowman faced the broadside from the three councillors, 28 separate delegations were lining up to plead for funding or tweaking of the 2019 budget. Advocates appeared from groups as widely diverse as the Manitoba Museum, unions representing city workers, the construction industry, cyclists and transit supporters to name a few.

Chris Lorenc of the Manitoba Heavy Construction Association asked councillors to find a way to make up the gap left behind by the loss of capital funding from the provincial government. "Simply to allow the province to arbitrarily walk away from a \$40-million payment liability should be a non-starter, not just to council, but to all Winnipeggers," Lorenc said.

Lorenc says the knock-on effect of that missing provincial money means 53 local streets and 11 back lanes in Winnipeg won't be repaired. He urged EPC to make up the lost funding through a mix of borrowing, redirecting funds from other projects or even a tax increase.

One-by-one, groups told councillors of holes in their own budget or projects they hoped to get financed. The Winnipeg Arts Council wants an already-budgeted \$500,000 drop in funding for public art reversed. The Manitoba Museum is asking for \$1 million for its capital renewal project. The Social Planning Council is hoping for \$85,000 to fund a co-ordinator for a anti-gang strategy it is championing.

There are also requests for funding for homelessness initiatives, the urban forestry budget and pleas to reconsider decommissioning the Norwood Pool. Final changes to the city's budget will be decided at next Tuesday's EPC meeting before a full vote at city council the next day.