

NORTH BAY TAXPAYERS' ASSOCIATION

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Taxpayers Pay For Council's Mistakes

Some months ago a group of North Bay residents from a variety of backgrounds came together to discuss a common purpose: identifying ways we could contribute to making our community a model for responsible fiscal management.

Anyone who is paying attention to current events understands that municipal governments across North America are groaning under the weight of dangerously-ballooning levels of debt that threaten to bankrupt them, as well as the individual taxpayers being asked to pick up the tab for reckless levels of spending.

The North Bay Taxpayers Association is comprised of local residents who share concerns that, among Northern Ontario cities, ours has the second-highest municipal debt, the highest combined property tax and water/sewer costs, 47% higher road repair costs, and is one of two cities experiencing population decline.

At the very time the city's costs have been approaching critical levels, city council has seen fit to endorse staff wage hikes of 17.57% over the past four years-- almost triple the level of inflation -- pad departmental spending with hundreds of thousands of dollars of overtime, and embark on non-essential projects like the patchwork job on a 50-year-old arena that will cost local taxpayers \$2 million more than originally promised.

Our association's information, research and constructive criticisms have been met with a range of responses from members of city council, including questions about the legitimacy of our views and ulterior motives. Based on the last municipal election results, no city councillor can rightly say they represent more than 10 per cent of those of us who are paying for their municipal stipends -- and for their mistakes. In any event, electability is not necessarily synonymous with wisdom, or even common sense.

In June Mayor Al McDonald asked our association to provide a specific list of recommendations for cost savings and efficiencies that councillors could discuss this fall as they begin deliberations on the 2014 municipal budget. Our volunteer members devoted considerable time this summer to producing a six-page document of recommendations and rationale to which we asked for equally-specific responses.

The mayor's initial reply was that he estimated that our suggestions would "only" result in savings of \$1 million. We don't agree with the mayor's math, but even if he's correct, that's one million more dollars in cost-cutting proposals than city taxpayers have heard from the people they elected and pay to come up with such ideas.

Then the mayor unilaterally announced a "target" 1.5 % increase for the 2014 budget. Every householder and business operator knows that you don't start a serious cost-reduction exercise by basing it on an anticipated increase.

In the weeks ahead, all members of North Bay City Council will need to demonstrate a much greater level of understanding about their responsibility to their employers -- local citizens and taxpayers -- to justify taking up space around the city council table.

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