

After years of wild spending, how can Miller cry poor?

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Mayor David Miller has no business asking civic workers to take a financial hit, accept a wage freeze and help the city deal with what he claims is a "very difficult financial situation we have at the moment."

The mayor lost that moral authority long ago.

Despite a recession, Miller approved wage hikes for council in April, arguing that his councillors, well-paid at \$96,805, needed the raise to \$99,153. And he did it, even as he hypocritically argued that management staff should have their salaries frozen in light of the worsening economy.

Toronto's current financial situation has been a long time coming. If the city's finances were crimped, if revenues were falling, if costs were spiralling out of control, the time to contain them was in the spring budget, passed on April Fool's Day 11 weeks ago. Or the year before. Or every year Miller has been in office.

Miller has done the opposite. City spending is up \$558 million this year, \$904 million over two years.

Amid obvious signs of the recession, his 2009 budget hired 1,040 new staff, including the following non-mandatory hires: 333 at the TTC, 72 for facilities and real estate, 70 for parks, 66 for courts, 62 for police, 51 for long-term care, 19 in policy and planning, 18 for treasury, 16 in legal, and so on. Solid waste (57) and water services (45) – two departments not counted in the 1,040 because user fees cover their costs – add to the total. And a further 271 were approved for capital projects. Total: 1,413.

Why add 1,413 hires when the private sector is shedding jobs? How does one justify the largest budgetary spending increase in Toronto's history and a \$2.25 billion jump in spending in the past six years? And how can the mayor now cry poor 11 weeks later?

It's easy to jump on Toronto civic workers as they battle for a new contract. Thousands across North America face job losses, staffing cutbacks, salary reductions and economic uncertainty in the private sector. And as misery loves company, there's a thirsting for city workers to share the pain.

In short, the sentiment is: Quit your whining, give up your generous sick leave plan, quietly accept a pay freeze and be thankful you have a job.

The view is understandable, but unrealistic and totally unfair.

For years it's been clear Toronto is on an unsustainable financial path. Budgets are taped together with unrealistic funding requests to the province, raiding of reserve funds, delayed hiring, and a general hocus-pocus and voodoo budgeting.

Tax hikes did not match the spending levels. Spending levels have been too high for the anticipated revenues. And councillors continue to spend because, they say, their constituents need the services – even if they balk at paying for them with higher taxes.

So now, in 2009, using the recession as an excuse, the city wants to claw back benefits bargained by its employees. And if workers balk, they will be exposed to public anger. No self-respecting unionized worker would go for a wage freeze and a long list of take-backs – not in these circumstances.

For years we all participated in this sham. Citizens continued to demand higher service levels while balking

at taxes above 3 per cent. Politicians played along with the farce, knowing all the time it was not sustainable. So as we run out of options, we throw city workers under the bus. It's them or us. By dumping on them, we live to fight another day.

Survival of the fittest, understand?

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