

ARTICLE – Midtown Crier – October 2007 – Councillor Michael Walker

The recent round of budget debates at City Hall has had, and will continue to have, a very real and dramatic impact on the people of St. Paul's.

The Mayor and his Executive Committee have acted to cut services. Our Community Centres were first closed, then opened again; our outdoor ice rinks were closed until a corporate sponsor came riding in to save the day; our libraries were cut in August and are now opened again – after successful protest by the library workers' union (CUPE Local 416). Because of continuing budget mismanagement, our parks and trees will now receive even less maintenance; we will receive less snow clearing this winter; and the TTC is considering cutting 5 of our bus routes, in addition to raising transit fares.

What's gone wrong?

Over the past decade, Toronto has suffered as a result of the downloading of Provincial programs onto the City, such as Welfare (Ontario Works), Disability Payments (ODSP), and a decrepit stock of Provincial social housing. If it were not for the downloaded cost of these programs, the City's budget would likely be stable or at least manageable. First and foremost, this is a problem we need to solve in a way that has the Province assume its proper responsibility for Provincial programs.

The Mayor has done little to make this an issue with the provincial government.

He did even less to make this an issue during the recent provincial election, even though Council urged him to do just that. Wouldn't you expect him to hound the Premier to the point of embarrassment on this issue if it is so important to our future? Wouldn't you expect him to bring it up every chance he could in order to keep it on their minds? The Mayor has not taken the Province to task and we are all the worse for it.

What he has done is attempt to tax you, using new powers given to the City under the new City of Toronto Act: taxes on home-buying (a land transfer tax of up to 2% of the value of the sale) and taxes on vehicle registration. (\$60)

In my opinion, this is not simply a debate over the merits of higher taxes, but the form and the fairness of taxes as well.

In the past, property taxes and user fees, as well as Provincial grants, made up the City revenue required to provide City services. But a levy such as Mayor Miller's tax on the transfer of real estate is another thing altogether. This tax breaks with our tradition of universality that characterizes the homeowner property tax, in that it imposes a burden on one specific segment of the community. Nor is it comparable to a user fee, because no real service is used. It is certainly not akin to a "sin-tax" that is applied to self-destructive activities such as smoking, for example, because transferring real estate is not self-destructive, but a boost for the local economy.

At every public meeting held across the City to discuss these taxes – only one of which was attended by the Mayor – residents voiced their overwhelming opposition to these taxes. In St. Paul's, everyone who filled Christ Church Deer Park on June 6th was opposed to both taxes. In addition to their protest against the City Council's questionable management of tax dollars, they protested the targeted and discriminatory nature of these taxes. The majority of Torontonians has said loudly and clearly that these taxes are not part of our tradition, and they are not justifiable.

We should focus on uploading the Provincial services, cutback on non-essential services, cutback on grants, investigate delivering our services other ways, and look at more equitable ways of increasing revenues for the City.

I will not be supporting these new tax proposals. If we consent to these new taxes, we are simply opening the door to more of the same.

Word Count: 650