

BudgetSpeak 2020: As We Heard It

A review of the November 5, 2019 Budget Consultation held by
Councillors Leiper, McKenney, Menard, King, and Fleury.



BudgetSpeak 2020 – As We Heard It

On Tuesday, November 5, Councillors Leiper, McKenney, King, Fleury, and Menard welcomed a record number of participants for the annual BudgetSpeak event. We rely on this event to get valuable feedback from residents of the urban wards about what their budget priorities are, so the councillors can best advocate on their behalf during the budget process.

The event covered three main themes; mobility, social infrastructure, and housing affordability. Participants heard from the City treasurer's office about the draft budget for 2020, and three experts in these fields about what they believe are the big challenges faces Ottawa and how we can work together to overcome them. Afterwards, participants were given time to talk in table groups of roughly 8 people about what they identified as priorities for the 2020 municipal budget and possible solutions to the problems of transit reliability and access, overtaxed social services, and an ongoing housing and homelessness crisis. Included in this report is a brief summary of what our experts had to share with participants, and what we heard from residents. You can find more information about the 2020 Municipal Budget [here](#).

Social Infrastructure – Naini Cloutier

Naini Cloutier is the Executive Director of Somerset West Community Health Centre, an organization that provides a range of services to support the health and wellbeing of their community. She told us that the concept of social infrastructure is quite simple: it is the idea that residents can come together to learn from each other, share their knowledge and experiences, and support each other through challenges. Fostering a sense of community is crucial to the success of social services, and non-profit social services organizations like CNHA, Options Bytown, and Parkdale Food Centre have been doing this work in Ottawa for many years. Agencies support residents to help maximize their potential and enhance their health and wellbeing, and municipal funding is a crucial piece of this puzzle. These organizations benefit everyone, from seniors fighting isolation to low-income folks and regular food bank users to LGBTQ teens experiencing mental health challenges to those without reliable access to health care services.

Social services address not only physical health but mental and emotional wellbeing as well; they can foster friendships, provide care and services, and fill in the gaps where someone's basic needs may not be met in their daily life. The impact of social factors such as racism, homophobia, transphobia, and isolation often cannot be addressed by physical health services, but social services organizations are able to create programming that can help at-risk populations feel safe and secure. From drop-ins for transgender youth who may be feeling suicidal to peer support workers available to avert mental health crises to meal delivery and aging-in-place services for seniors to community-based crime prevention efforts, social services organizations can avert crises and reduce the strain on our health care system and the trauma that communities

experience when things go wrong. When we are planning for a city with a population of one million residents, we need to make sure there are adequate social services in place. Strong social infrastructure makes resilient communities, a necessity for a healthy city.

Housing Affordability – Lisa Ker

Lisa Ker is the Executive Director of Salus Corporation, a non-profit housing corporation that provides safe, quality, affordable housing to people with persistent and serious mental illness. One-hundred percent of the people housed by Salus are living with a mental illness and are paying no more than the maximum shelter portion for their housing – approximately \$500 per month. Lisa has been involved with advocacy and assistance of people experiencing homelessness and housing precarity for many years, both here and in Toronto. She reminded participants that one doesn't need to be an expert on housing affordability and housing precarity to see we have a crisis on our hands, and to see the impact of that crisis every day.

Lisa explained that Affordable housing advocates have recently shifted their focus to the broader term of housing affordability, allowing them to bring more people on board with their message and concerns, especially those in the middle class who also worry about being able to afford to own a home long-term. She expressed her displeasure over the increasing use of the term “rough sleeping” to differentiate between people who sleep outdoors and those who live in a shelter, and her concerns that the popularization of this term implies that living in a shelter “isn't so bad.” She spoke about how she feels shelter living is no longer perceived as scandalous, that people see homelessness as part of our landscape; we're a big city now, and these are big city problems.

Finally, Lisa expressed her concerns that our current transit crisis is pulling focus – and possibly funding – away from the housing crisis. She acknowledged that all these issues are connected, and that when we set our 2020 budget priorities, we need to think about what kind of city we want to live in. She also called for a doubling of the current investment of \$15 million in affordable housing over one year at least doubled.

Mobility – Sally Thomas

Sally Thomas is a former Paralympian and transit advocate. She moved to Ottawa from Belleville, ON in search of a more inclusive city, and has been publicly advocating for one since the 2001 Para Transpo strike which lasted eleven and a half weeks and left many users stranded.

She highlighted particular issues with Para Transpo, one example being that users are charged extra for their Para ride if they want to go somewhere outside of the urban boundary. There are also ongoing issues with reliability and scheduling wait times. There are huge disparities between Para Transpo and OC Transpo users, the

main one being that Para users must plan and book every trip at least 24 hours in advance, which means there is no room for spontaneity or measures for emergencies.

Sally noted that 15% of our population is disabled, and they are important enough to consider in the budget. Inclusive design of not only our transit systems but our entire city benefits everyone, so we can all live together in the best Ottawa possible.

As We Heard It

After these three keynotes, we had participants discuss the themes of social infrastructure, housing affordability, and mobility at their tables for about thirty minutes, and asked each table group to report back to the whole what they determined as budget priorities and solutions. The following is a compilation of what we heard from residents during this period, and notes from councillor's assistants seated at each table facilitating the discussions.

Housing Affordability

Residents presented several creative solutions to the problem of housing affordability, which was a focus for the majority of table groups. Residents proposed spending less money on emergency shelters and more money on long term affordable housing options for people with varying needs. Residents favoured the idea of tiny houses or modular homes made out of recycled shipping containers as a possible solution to our housing crisis – a method that has been reportedly used on the west coast of Canada and the US with some success. They also recommended working with developers to make sure affordable housing units can be included in new buildings, especially near transit and in more densely populated neighbourhoods. The concept of funding the creation and maintenance of affordable housing through public/private partnerships was also proposed, although other groups dissented and felt that public services should be publicly owned. Lack of affordable housing stock was determined to be a problem of political will by some who didn't see the budget as the problem, but rather the lack of motivation from City leadership to address the problem.

Some groups suggested simplifying the planning process to save money that could be redirected to building more affordable housing, and prioritizing meeting people's needs by providing supports where they live and work. Removing the stigma around affordable housing and centering culture and community in affordable housing complexes was identified as a crucial change to our current model, as well as investing in maintenance of affordable housing to make sure it's high quality. Creating affordable housing where the location and building amenities make it desirable is crucial. Residents also called for better relationships with the provincial and federal governments to secure their investments in affordable housing in Ottawa and raised concerns about "ghetto-izing" various neighbourhoods. More practical suggestions

included; promoting inclusionary zoning, creating stricter regulations on short term rentals to free up access to units in the rental market, reducing property taxes for non-profit housing corporations, including more wrap-around supports in existing affordable housing, expanding the City's rent supplement program to make it more portable, building more affordable housing that's suitable for families, and raising the safety standards for rooming houses.

Social Infrastructure

Overall, residents wanted to see more money put into social infrastructure in the 2020 municipal budget and beyond. There was a strong emphasis on ensuring those accessing social services could do so with dignity and feel included in all areas of the city. Residents also identified the opportunity to create more community hubs where long term and drop-in support services are provided by repurposing vacant buildings around the city. An increase in easily accessible community centres where people of all walks of life can find supports, services, and programs for them can help reduce isolation and avert mental health crises. Some residents noted that there are often duplicate social service organizations operating simultaneously around the city and wondered if those services could be consolidated with financial support from the City to work more efficiently. Residents also voiced concerns about a lack of focus on addressing child poverty and wanted to ensure that social supports were being directed at children and youth in need.

Table groups also discussed the need to divert funding for mental healthcare to preventative measures, which will reduce strains on our physical health services and ER wait times. Participants also put a strong emphasis on ease of access to social supports and services, and decried the lack of funding for community health centres and food banks like the Parkdale Food Centre, which is really innovating the way that food insecurity is addressed by trying to provide fresh produce and facilitate home cooking for people experiencing housing precarity or low income. Basically, participants wanted to see the City thinking sustainably, and funding prevention over reaction.

Mobility

Most of the concerns participants had about mobility centered on reliability and accessibility of public transit and snow clearing. Participants noted the need for more money for clearing and moving snowbanks to help keep our roads and sidewalks safe in the winter. One group also felt adding more free transit days for various groups beyond seniors might encourage more ridership on OC Transpo, as well increasing the reliability of buses and LRT. Some participants felt there should be better accountability for cancelled buses, and car owners should be taxed at a higher rate.

Many participants noted that the booking system for Para Transpo is outdated and unfair and wanted to see more accessible transit options available on-demand, as well as an updated booking system and more considerations made for people with

sensory sensitivities and developmental disorders. Residents also expressed concerns about rideshare programs threatening the accessible taxi service and felt the budget should prioritize this service. Still other participants wanted to see transit fares lowered and/or frozen, improved transit links to Gatineau, carbon pricing to reduce emissions, and overall commitment to building a transit experience that is sustainable and desirable, thereby discouraging single car use.

Conclusion

It was clear from the turnout and active discussions at BudgetSpeak 2020 that residents of the urban wards feel passionately about housing affordability, social infrastructure, and mobility. Residents voiced frustration with the hard cap on revenue from a 3% annual tax increase that places limitations on what each budget can achieve and can create bigger problems to be solved years down the line. Moreover, some participants felt it was unfair to have ordinary citizens making decisions about the budget. They also voiced concerns about what would have to be cut in order to pay for the increases many others were proposing.

Participants wanted to see the City thinking differently about how to solve and prevent the issues that afflict all big cities and hiring more city staff to make sure the standards and by-laws we already have are being properly enforced. Overall, participants seemed to share in the sentiment that Ottawa could – and should – do better.