

POLITICS DECEMBER 23, 2016 AT 12:17 PM | 5 COMMENTS

# Toronto's Budget Gaps Affect the City's Most Vulnerable

With structural budget problems, the City cannot solve its challenges through efficiencies alone.

BY TANNARA YELLAND



Photo by Flickr user Michael Ryan.

The City's 2017 budget is being debated, and thanks to a [report on the equity and economic impacts](#) we know about some of the proposed cuts and the effects they will have on city residents. Among the proposals are: close the Downsview Dell emergency shelter, eliminate homelessness-prevention services, and slash Toronto Community Housing funding.

While the budget isn't yet finalized and many of the most draconian cuts are still hypothetical, the City has a \$91-million hole to fill. Sean Meagher, executive director of Social Planning Toronto, says that until we begin to look at the City's budget in a new light, this kind of desperate wrangling will continue to happen year after year. What's worse, the City will be in for a bumpy ride when "sooner or later" the real estate market dips, leading to a decline in land-transfer tax dollars.

"The reality is that there will never be enough efficiency to solve the problem," said Meagher.

A huge part of the problem, as Meagher explained it, is that the City can't levy income and sales taxes, and the province no longer funds some of the services—such as the TTC—it used to put those taxes toward. The result is a budget stretched for cash, with councillors considering measures that would devastate Toronto residents while offering only temporary budget calm.

"What this budget does is set out in the clearest terms we could ask for what the choice is for the City of Toronto," said Meagher. "It is either we eviscerate things that are critically important to the well-being of some people, or we make a point of avoiding making anybody else contribute enough to be able to fund the kind of city that we historically have said we want to have."

Some signs point to evisceration. The \$91-million shortfall in the budget could be covered by increasing the property tax by 3.6 per cent (above the two per cent it's already set to increase by), but Tory is standing firm in his promise not to increase property taxes above inflation. By asking each department to shave 2.6 per cent off its budget, regardless of size, the mayor is ignoring the fact that some departments operate on shoestrings while others have ballooned to \$1 billion. None of that speaks to a firm commitment to social services, and it seems to point to, at best, Council being unwilling to face the choice Meagher laid out. At worst, it would appear to imply that they have made their choice.

"I don't think it's fair to say that people just don't want to do anything," said Meagher. "I think it's fairer to say that they need to go through the process of recognizing how critical and unavoidable these choices really are."

But, as Meagher also noted, City Council has spent the past six years straining to find what works and politicians call "efficiencies"—cuts to budgets, services, and staff. In that time, even after bringing in accounting firms to scour the numbers, "We've never found anywhere near the amount of savings we would need to balance our budget. We've never even found a tenth of that."

Unless and until Council makes a decision on whether it is in the business of providing services—which would require properly funding them, and demanding the tools to do so in a sustainable manner—or balancing budgets no matter the cost, the people of Toronto will continue to receive mixed messages. Is Council prepared to fight poverty in the city, as evidenced by its passage of the Poverty Reduction Strategy? Or does it want to balance budgets while sacrificing priorities, as evidenced by the (generously speaking) [lacklustre funding](#) for said strategy? That this debate is occurring as some shelters have been operating at [nearly 100 per cent capacity](#) and the city enters the coldest months of the year does not portend well.

The good news is that the budget has yet to be finalized, and the worst may not come to pass. The bad news is that without a dramatic shift in how Council and the mayor approach budgeting, we are all likely to revisit this drama in 12 months.

**MORE FROM COUNCIL WATCH**

**Poll Position: John Tory Enjoys Middle of the Road Approval Ratings**

**A Foreign Homebuyer Tax is Just One Option for Tackling Toronto's Rising Home**

**Duly Quoted: CUPE 416 on Outsourcing Garbage**

**Duly Quoted: If Only Every Toronto Budget Policy Had A Celebrity Champion**

FILED UNDER [COUNCIL WATCH](#), [MUNICIPAL BUDGET 2017](#), [POLITICS](#), [SEAN MEAGHER](#)

SHARE [f](#) [t](#) [g+](#) [p](#) [e](#) [REPORT ERROR](#) · [SEND A TIP](#)

**Comments**

5 Comments Torontoist Login

Recommend 1 Share Sort by Oldest

Join the discussion...

**wklis** · 25 days ago  
Are there no prisons? Are there no workhouses? Bah, humbug!

**Roy Murray** · 25 days ago  
I feel sorry for the dog - being used as a prop to attract sympathy - who has no choice but to sit there in the cold.

**dsmithfx** → Roy Murray · 20 days ago  
Best head on down to the dog pound and scoop up some rescue animals. Unless you were being facetious.

**Roy Murray** → dsmithfx · 20 days ago  
What does my adopting from the pound have to do with an unscrupulous individual's begging? Should I expect you to have adopted 'some rescue animals' in order to qualify to hold an opinion?

**lookyhere** · 24 days ago  
British societies are all like this.

There's a reason why 'Scrooge' was penned by a british author.

A Heartless people with a capital "H".

**ALSO ON TORONTOIST**

**Outsourced: CUPE 416 on Duly Quoted: Garbage**  
14 comments · 5 days ago

**OgtheDim** — Check your bucket next time you go strawberry picking because you gather incorrectly.Love the

**Buds Kingdom** — medical marijuana available pls do check http://budsdispensary.wixsite....

**Your Choices for Toronto's 2016 Superhero and Supervillain of the Year**  
10 comments · 11 days ago

**scunny** — Not boring at all for those Torontonians who don't view our hometown primarily through the

**A Foreign Homebuyer Tax is Just One Option for Tackling Toronto's Rising**  
5 comments · 5 days ago

**Dusty Ayres** — I want this tax to happen here-it would allow many people (including two family members of mine)

**How Property Taxes Work**  
1 comment · 5 days ago

**Royal York: Notorious, and Now Up for Sale**  
1 comment · 5 days ago

**Top Ten Degraasi Junior High Degrassis**  
1 comment · 5 days ago

**Photo Essay: Toronto's Love of Pool-Hopping**  
1 comment · 5 days ago

**In Search of Toronto's Geographic Centre**  
1 comment · 5 days ago

**How Property Taxes Work**  
1 comment · 5 days ago

**Royal York: Notorious, and Now Up for Sale**  
1 comment · 5 days ago

**Top Ten Degraasi Junior High Degrassis**  
1 comment · 5 days ago

**Photo Essay: Toronto's Love of Pool-Hopping**  
1 comment · 5 days ago

**In Search of Toronto's Geographic Centre**  
1 comment · 5 days ago

**SUBSCRIBER LOGIN**

SEARCH TORONTOIST

**Special Notices**

**TO do** Featured list of events, attractions and special ticket offers.

**Newsletters**

Get need-to-know Toronto news delivered straight to your inbox every weekday—for free.

**TORONTOIST**  
TORONTOIST.COM/NEWSLETTERS

**Editor's Picks**

**DEBUNKING THE MYTH THAT CYCLISTS DON'T PAY THEIR FAIR SHARE FOR THE ROAD**

Everyone pays for the road.

**TORONTO'S TWICE-ANNUAL AVIAN MASSACRE BEGINS NOW**

**WHY WE SHOULD TALK ABOUT MENTAL HEALTH MORE**

Conversations about mental health can lead to meaningful cultural shifts, writes Lindsay Hill.

**WHAT A SCARBOROUGH SINGLE MOTHER'S DAILY COMMUTE LOOKS LIKE**

This 53-year-old travels four hours a day through the city.

**HOW PROPERTY TAX REASSESSMENTS WORK IN ONTARIO**

**TAKE ACTION TOGETHER**

TO DEFEAT BREAST CANCER

Join us at BCACampaign.com #BCAstrength @BCACampaign

THE ESTÉE LAUDER COMPANIES BREAST CANCER RESEARCH CAMPAIGN

**Social Media**

Follow @torontoist

**TORONTOIST** Torontoist 55,842 likes

Like Page Share

Be the first of your friends to like this

**TORONTOIST FAVOURITES**

A Farewell From Vandalist

Historicist: "Sip 'n Sex"—Paul Godfrey's Origin

Riding the Union-Pearson Express

The Eastern Commerce Way

Mapping Where Torontonians Bike and

Royal York: Notorious, and Now Up for Sale

A Short History of Toronto's Street Signs

Putting New Streetcars to the Test

How Property Taxes Work

Top Ten Degraasi Junior High Degrassis

Photo Essay: Toronto's Love of Pool-Hopping

In Search of Toronto's Geographic Centre