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Proposed budget cuts will hurt city's most vulnerable, advisory groups tell Mayor Tory

A 2.6 per cent budget cut across all divisions, agencies would set city back on anti-poverty goals



Toronto Mayor John Tory says money related to the city's poverty strategy will not be part of budget negotiations. But a wide-range of advisory groups worry programs will be cut. (STEVE RUSSELL / TORONTO STAR) | ORDER THIS PHOTO

By **JENNIFER PAGLIARO** City Hall reporter
Tues., Nov. 22, 2016



Those representing the city's most vulnerable residents are calling out Mayor John Tory's proposed budget cuts, saying they could hurt badly-needed services.

Letters addressed to Tory and council from advisory groups representing youth, seniors, those with disabilities and those focused on food security and health initiatives argue Tory's request that all city divisions and departments find 2.6 per cent in savings for next year's budget will further disadvantage those they represent.

As the city struggles to balance the budget without any new sources of revenue, Tory — whose campaign promise to not raise property taxes above the rate of inflation has further limited the budgeting process — said investments related to the city's poverty reduction strategy will be off the table when budget negotiations launch next month.

But advocates say pushing cuts on top of existing budget pressures could do serious harm.

"Now is the time for true leadership from council. We must look to build our city and our citizens up, and not just follow the status quo that is hurting so many young Torontonians," reads one letter from the Toronto Youth Cabinet, an advisory group established by council.

"A 2.6 per cent cut to the city's budget will have a significant impact on the lives of the city's youth, especially those in marginalized communities."

In an emailed statement, the mayor's office outlined more than \$100 million in poverty reduction initiatives the city has previously funded under Tory's watch, including extending some library hours and expanding student nutrition programs.

"Bottom line is we have to pay for the services we deliver, and what the mayor has done is asked each and every division of the city to take a hard look at their books to make sure the money is being spent wisely," the statement said, noting some savings for 2017 have already been found that will not impact services.

"Over the long-term, a larger fix is clearly required. Along with the budget chair Gary Crawford, the mayor will lead a discussion about long-term answers to our city's budget problems so we can continue to serve the needs of our city's residents."

The Toronto Seniors' Forum, Toronto Food Policy Council, and the chairs of the Board of Health and earlier the Disability, Access and Inclusion Advisory Committee have all written to Tory and council.

The Youth Cabinet letter, signed by budget lead Riley Peterson and executive director Tom Gleason, notes Toronto remains the **child poverty capital of Canada** and potential cuts to library services, youth programs, student nutrition along with additional closures of community housing units and increased TTC fares "would make it harder for youth, and other marginalized communities, to break the cycle of poverty."

"The proposed cuts for the student nutrition programs, that work to address issues of child hunger and poverty, peer nutrition programs, and food handler training through the community food works program will further jeopardize those who are most vulnerable and at risk of not being able to put food on their tables," the Toronto Food Policy Council letter reads.

Detailed operating and capital budget submissions from each division and city agencies like Toronto Community Housing and Toronto Public Library will be published next month. Council's final approval of those budgets will be in February.

Sean Meagher, executive director of advocacy group Social Planning Toronto, said they hope Tory is serious about insulating anti-poverty spending from possible cuts, but said the concern doesn't stop there.

"The question becomes, if you protect the things that were specifically, literally, in the poverty reduction strategy but do other things that disadvantage those same people as much or more, how much progress are you really making?" Meagher asked. "We've been kicking the can down the road for a long time. We are running out of road."

A staff report on possible new taxes and fees council could use to balance future budgets will be released on Thursday. The same day, Tory is expected to make a speech to the Toronto Region Board of Trade where he will, for the first time, endorse which of those measures he supports.

The last time council had the politically-charged debate over what are called "revenue tools," they ultimately didn't back any after hours of debate.

Options include taxes on alcohol and tobacco, on commercial parking spaces or reintroducing the vehicle registration tax.

The advisory group letters say council must not put off the decision on how to raise new revenues this time around, even though it is unlikely any of the tools would be implemented in time to balance the 2017 budget.

"I think what the community is saying back is, you've got all these tools in your hands that prevent the cuts that are going to harm vulnerable people — use them," Meagher said.

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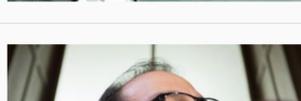
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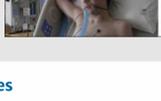
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