

Penny and Pound Foolish

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Ald. Craig Burrows is right. We should be investing in our municipal politicians. Unfortunately, while his principles are in the right place, he's wrong about nearly everything else relating to his \$12,000 corporate governance course.

The Better Calgary Campaign, a volunteer group with whom I work, has long advocated the need to bring better people into municipal politics, and to give those who choose to serve the tools they need to do a good job.

To be blunt, being an alderman should never be the best job an incumbent will ever have, and that incumbent should have the skills to focus on issues that really matter. That's why I was supportive of the latest aldermanic pay hikes, and of increasing the office budget so that aldermen could each have two assistants.

However, the case of Burrows and the Institute of Corporate Directors course steps well over the line for a number of reasons.

First, the process stank. Council is not equipped to deal with requests of this nature, and there does not appear to be a process in place. The decision to pay for this course was made by the audit committee, and not really made public until a month after the fact.

Some aldermen, worried about public backlash, voted to rescind the payment -- but only after the course had started. The money has not been refunded.

Second, the course itself is of questionable value for Burrows's job. It's really meant for directors of publicly traded companies, which have very different requirements for directors than does the city.

There is a version offered by the same people for non-profit directors, but this only costs \$2,500. Burrows did not sign up. The city had already invited governance experts for a free seminar for aldermen last year. Burrows did not attend.

We are left to imagine that Burrows wanted to take this particular course, with classmates who are captains of industry, in an election year, for one of two reasons: either he feels he will be re-elected no matter what this fall, so this will be a good investment for taxpayers, or this course will help him in his post- aldermanic career. Neither reflects well on Burrows.

The most important reason this was troubling, however, was the amount of money involved. It's almost as though Burrows has forgotten what \$12,000 means to the average Calgarian. Since Burrows has an undergraduate degree and would have some advanced credit, \$12,000 would have gotten him an entire applied degree in non- profit management at Mount Royal College. Or, it means that my parents' property taxes for the last five years have paid for nothing but Burrows's course.

Burrows, while probably the worst offender, is far from unique in this regard. The entire council seems guilty of losing perspective on how much money they are spending -- easy to do when you regularly deal with numbers in the millions.

On the one hand, they spend what they think of as small amounts with abandon. In an election year, the mayor sent out a glossy report to all Calgarians with some 13 pictures of himself cutting ribbons, looking like a leader.

The cost to taxpayers? A mere \$70,000, or five years' worth of rent for one of my students. Or, perhaps more to the point, \$70,000 is more than all of the mayor's opponents in the last election spent on their campaigns. Combined.

On the other hand, when it comes to big amounts, council has the annoying habit of reducing everything to an individual household.

Want the streets plowed? It'll cost you \$45. Recycling? That's \$13 per month, please. While some may argue that this trend increases transparency and accountability, I say it's a way to duck questions of true leadership.

There are some things that a civic government just does -- plowing, maintaining parks, providing police, fire and ambulance, and so on. Paying for these services is part of our duty as citizens.

Reducing everything to the lowest common denominator leads to thinking that services are only for the individual, not the community -- I don't have kids, give me a rebate on the portion of my taxes that paid for the playground.

Seen in this context, Burrows's \$12,000 misadventure becomes a symptom of a larger, more complex problem: how can we get a council that is capable of thinking big thoughts and making big changes, but still rooted in the real lives of real people?

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