

IN THE NEWS

'Santa Claus' Bronconnier blasted for \$100M wish list

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Critics are assailing a proposal by Mayor Dave Bronconnier to spend \$100 million on "nice-to-do but not need-to-do projects," such as building a new downtown library and improving other tourist attractions. The five-year plan comes to city council Monday, the same day elected officials are being asked to give final approval to the largest property tax increase -- about five per cent -- in a decade.

At least one alderman and several outside observers were quick to criticize the proposal, which calls for the city to use the federal GST refund, worth \$19 million this year, to invest in a new library, the zoo, Heritage Park and the science centre. "I don't think Paul Martin, when he anted up more GST money, had it in his head that he was going to turn Dave Bronconnier into Santa Claus," said Dan Kelly, spokesman for the Canadian Federation of Independent Business. He said the money should go toward cutting the five per cent tax hike or maintaining the city's focus on its major infrastructure deficit.

Calgary has accumulated a \$1-billion, 10-year backlog in roads and transportation projects that has prompted the mayor to lobby senior levels of government for changes to the way cities are funded. But Bronconnier changed his tune slightly Thursday, saying the city needs to focus on the community, in addition to building roads and improving transit. "We are not getting off that message," he said. "We are going to continue to build on transportation." Bronconnier said, however, it's important to remain competitive as a city by having first-class tourist venues. "When people come to cities, they want to go to attractions," he said. "They don't want to look at pavement. "I love pavement, don't get me wrong," the mayor quickly added, noting the city has put \$560 million into roads, interchanges, the LRT system and buses during the past three years. "But overall, what attracts people is the openness of Calgary, the quality of life we have. . . the amenities that are in the community."

The so-called Community Investment Fund would help city-owned facilities. It would allocate \$40 million toward the construction of a new downtown library that could be located in the redeveloped East Village or on city-owned land at Louise Crossing on the west side of downtown, Bronconnier said.

The zoo would receive \$30 million to start work on a multi-year plan for a \$100-million aquarium facility. Heritage Park would get \$10 million for much-needed upgrades as the park marks its 40th anniversary. And the city's science centre would receive \$20 million as it looks to build a new home near the zoo.

Ald. Ric McIver, however, said the proposal sounds like politicking. "It is an election year and it's not unusual for people to try to give things away in an election year or spend money on special projects in an election year," he said. McIver, known as a fiscal hawk, added that council needs to consider this year's tax increase before approving the community investment fund. "This isn't one-time money," he said. "This is ongoing money so the money actually, in this case, could very easily be used to reduce the operating budget -- and that option should be considered with all others." Adding \$20 million to the budget would virtually eliminate the entire tax increase, he said.

The topic is sure to spark debate at City Hall on Monday when council meets to give final approval to the 2004 budget, as well as approve the proposed fund. Other aldermen are already saying investing in the community is important. "We have to create a balance. This is certainly the way to go," said Ald. Linda Fox-Mellway, who sits on the library board. "The money from the GST refund was for sustainability, so this is going to take us well into the future."

Officials representing the city-owned tourist attractions were also pleased. Bill Peters, chief executive of the Calgary Science Centre, said it will go a long way toward the centre's \$100-million future development. "We have such a busy science centre -- I just know how much more fun Calgarians would have in learning and discovery if we had a better science centre," he said. "I'm just thrilled Mayor Bronconnier feels the same way."

And while the chief executive of the Calgary Zoo also applauded the plan, Alex Graham said he has a few concerns. "It all depends on the attitude of the government toward his challenge," Graham said. "And he is also challenging me to go out into the community and fundraise."

The proposal requires the four facilities to use the money for leveraging funds from other sources. Graham said it may be difficult to run four major fundraising campaigns in the city at the same time. "The real question then is how you make all of that happen?" he said. "But at the same time, I would expect we're all at different stages of advancement and I would suspect it's one we can stick-handle our way through."

The provincial government was also complimentary of the proposal to use the federal GST refund for local facilities. "It's dollars that probably shouldn't have come out of the community anyway," said Jerry Bellikka, a spokesman for Finance Minister Pat Nelson, who was recently involved in a municipal-provincial spat with the mayor over infrastructure dollars. "There are all sorts of priorities," he said. "It's up to the city to balance those priorities."