February 16, 2024

Dear Mayor Morgan and Members of the Budget Committee,

Thank you all for your work on this budget. I appreciate the space you are making to hear community concerns and I commend your advocacy on behalf of your constituents.

I am writing to share suggestions for your consideration of potential improvements to future iterations of London's budget-making process, aimed at reducing barriers to public engagement.

As we near the end of this multi-year budget cycle, I reflected on my experiences participating, facilitating community outreach, and having discussions with some of you.
This budget was particularly tough to work on because of its social and economic context. Difficult compromises had to be made. Most groups got some of what they wanted and had to make sacrifices.

From my point of view, the budget was made even more challenging by the way it was communicated. I do not believe this budget was as accessible, transparent, or objective as the community would have liked for it to be. I suspect that engagement with the budget became more complicated, confusing, and polarized because of misunderstanding. While there were wonderful initiatives in the community to facilitate engagement, including many information sessions and "budget translation" services provided, certain barriers made the budget harder for many non-expert folks to access and understand.

I'm providing below a shortlist of suggestions, with an invitation to pick up and discuss any of them later, whenever is convenient.

1. Components of the draft budget are available in spreadsheet format from the City of London Open Data portal (source). However, this resource is not mentioned anywhere on the Get Involved page for the multi-year budget or in the budget document itself. As far as I can tell, the portal was not updated with information about the mayor's budget or subsequent amendments. **Access to these data would make it easier for the public to track, collate and compare items in the budget.** Spreadsheets also make it easier to generate graphs, which is important for accessibility because it enables visual comparisons of large sums that are difficult to grasp (e.g., the difference between $1,000 and $1,000,000 is abstract for many people). The current budget included information in a PDF that did not allow copying directly from the document, which means any analysis would require that budget items are transcribed manually line-by-line to convert into other formats. This made extra work for supporting community outreach efforts. **I am attaching with this letter a spreadsheet template that I created for communicating contents of the budget (note that it lacks amendments).** This format could be adapted and used by staff preparing future draft budgets.
2. **Information about how external sources of funding are reflected in business cases should be presented in a standardized format.** It would be helpful to indicate the

conditions of funding sources – as in, whether it is dedicated to specific projects or could be redistributed, and if there is a timing window attached. Providing a breakdown of external funding streams as an appendix might be useful.

3. **Budget items that are mandatory, legislatively required, or determined through a process external to the budget itself, should be clearly labelled as such.** This can help the public to distinguish between "wants" and "needs" and to understand the restrictions Council faces when considering adjustments.

4. A **glossary section with definitions and high-level explanations of terms** used in the budget would be generally useful. This could be embedded in the budget or in the Strategic Financial Framework. Perhaps the budget communications could be reviewed in advance by a non-expert group to flag anything that is unclear.

5. The process of Council receiving delegations from representatives of commissions, agencies and community groups during the budget debates seemed disjointed, stressful and did not allow much time for new information shared during these delegations to be processed before voting occurred. Why not instead **host these delegations at standing committee meetings prior to budget debate sessions**? This format could be applied to annual budget updates as well.

6. **Campaigning surrounding this budget by interested parties raise concerns about public opinion being manipulated by aggressive, fear-based marketing and framing.** Given the complexity of the budget, many Londoners depend on access to information provided by external parties to inform their own advocacy. Does the City have a policy or guideline that applies to these third-party activities?

7. Unlike many other comparable cities in Ontario, London presently lacks a public lobbying registry. Consequently, **it is impossible for the public to access information about which interest groups have met privately with members of Council to discuss the budget**. It appears that some groups were granted privileged access to public information sessions. In the interest of transparency, it may be prudent for members of future budget committees to produce records of their engagements with such groups. I am not aware of any requirements for keeping such records.

8. **The City of London's advisory committees were impeded from providing feedback** on the multi-year budget by changes to process that were not made clear until feedback had already been submitted to standing committees. The schedule (draft budget released in mid-December) left very little time for feedback to be received from the committees and transmitted. A bit more time being included in the budget timeline for initial community consultations could lead to improved quality of feedback being made available to Council.

I hope you will join me in reflecting on your experiences of this budget process, and consider how stewardship of the budget can make this process more transparent, equitable and accessible in the future.

Regards,

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