

Member of Council and Residents of London,

My name is Michele Girash. I am a homeowner in Ward 1. I have raised 3 children here – 2 are away at University and one soon will be. I am a volunteer and Board member with several community groups and non-profit organizations but today I am here speaking as an individual.

Thank you for giving me the time to voice my concerns today. Moreover, thank you for the ways in which you have supported community engagement in our civic government processes this past year. Re-Think London, the Budget consultation process, these are just two examples of what, I hope, will lead to thoughtful and hopeful forward thinking progress in our city.

To the staff of City Hall, the opportunity to engage with you – ask questions, suggest solutions – has been extraordinary. You are outstanding in what you do and we are lucky to have you.

We are here to discuss the proposed 2013 budget. It took me a good deal of time to determine how I would approach my 5 minutes today. I've decided to talk about promises made and choices.

As candidates, you all made promises to the voters of London. Many of you promised to reduce taxes (some to 0) but swore to protect services. Now you're in a tough position. The given budget options require you to break one of those promises. Which one will you break? I am here today to suggest that you have really only one just choice. London is a city on the brink of change. We need to move into the realm of modern, urban centres. To me, this means allocating tax dollars paid by residents in way that ensures that we move forward leaving no one behind. Look around this country and this world. There are similarities in great cities of all sizes. They include strong, stable funding for the services provided to the most vulnerable of the population – services such as housing and social programs. They include innovative and modern methods of moving people – by foot, cycle, transit and automobile. They include strong and vibrant community hubs – places to gather, meet and share ideas, information and knowledge. In London, many of these can be found in our library system and I will focus on this today.

In my work life, I have travelled the province and the country. I'll let you in on a trick of the trade – when working in a new town, I often get there a day or two before I am due to meet with the folks I'm working for. I explore the community. I visit the parks, the shops, the tourist attractions, the post-secondary institutions, yes the Tim Hortons all to get sense of the place. I ALWAYS visit the library. Why? Because it tells me about the vibe of the city. Because it gives me a sense of what the priorities of the town are. What are the newspapers on the shelf? What languages are available? What are the workshops and courses being offered? I can tell you that London has a library system that far outshines most of what I've seen out there. With your vote on this budget you have the choice to protect this world-class asset. With your vote you can protect this important community gathering place that has a reach across demographic groups. With your vote you can protect this resource hub that is already a priority for this city.

For the past several months, I've had the privilege to participate in the Strengthening Neighbourhoods in Argyle project. Council members, I'm sure you're familiar with the Strategy and with this document. I want to read you two parts. First: "Our London neighbourhoods will be empowered, sustainable, safe and active communities. We will care for and celebrate each other while encouraging diversity and inclusiveness."

I can think of no place that better fits this than a library. Walk into any library in London. Or take a look at the library schedule. Empowerment? Active? Diversity? Inclusiveness? You will find that all at the library.

The second piece I want to read is here – under the strategy for amenities – The priority listed for the library is : Support London Public Library in their ongoing campaign to increase use of facilities, programs etc.

This is a priority that you set – that you approved. With your vote to protect library funding, you can affirm this priority and the importance of our libraries as community hubs in our neighbourhoods.

Most importantly, with your vote to protect library funding, you'll make life a little less cruel for those who are already struggling. You'll continue to provide that place of safety, of information, growth and community that so many need.

Now I mentioned that I have kids. One is still in high school. Many of you are parents. You know that the best way to ensure their well-being in life is to help them get a solid education. For

some this is easier than others. Did you know that most high school students now MUST submit essays and such electronically? This requires a number of things- a computer, an email address...and internet access. The lowest priced internet access I've been able to find is around \$50/month....\$600 /year. If you're having trouble putting food on the table. I can guarantee that the computer, let alone the costly internet access, is out of the question. Where do these kids go? To the library. Don't lock them out.

If you ask my children about their first teachers, they won't mention their kindergarten teachers. They'll mention a wonderful woman named Catherine who was at the Crouch Library. They'll talk about "library school"...meaning the Books for Babies or Reading with Tots programs we used to attend. They'll tell you that Catherine knew what they were interested in and set books and videos and cassette tapes (yes, it was a while ago) aside for them. My oldest son, who is dyslexic and has struggled with learning disabilities, will tell you that he's a reader, in part, because his "library school teacher Catherine" didn't give him baby books to compensate for his challenge but instead interesting, vibrant books that pulled him in.

Now my kids are going to have options. They are all planning graduate and professional degrees. They will be deciding where to settle down. Will it be London? Only if we make this a vibrant, progressive city where we take care of each other. You can do that by protecting funding for our vulnerable neighbours, for being forward thinking in your approach to transit, cycling, walkability, the environment, culture, greenspace. You can do that by ensuring that their kids, my grandkids, have access to a Library School Teacher like Catherine.

I mentioned at the beginning that you are all in the difficult position of choosing a small tax cut – about the cost of a couple tanks of gas – or choosing to continue to provide strong services to ensure a vibrant , progressive, compassionate city. I urge you to choose the latter.