

DELEGATION TO BURLINGTON COUNCIL – NOVEMBER 4TH, 2024

Re: 8.1 - 2025 Budget overview (F-36-24)

Good morning Madam Mayor and Members of Council. My name is Stephen White, and in addition to being a Ward 5 resident I am Secretary and a co-founder of the Burlington Residents' Action Group.

Before beginning my remarks I want to offer an admission. I am not an accountant. I am not a financial analyst. I am not an economist. What I am however is a long-time Burlington resident who attended three budget consultation meetings this year in person, and one virtually. I did so not out of an abiding interest in financial reporting, but out of a deep concern for the state of this city's financial affairs.

I've lived through several municipal administrations in the forty-nine years I've lived in Burlington. Whatever differences I may have had with my municipal government throughout these years I always worked under the impression that this city was well-managed financially. I would open my tax bill in January of every year, and fully expected a modest increase to cover additional capital improvement costs or inflationary increases. While I would joke about having to pay extra, in truth, deep down, I felt this city had its financial affairs in order. However, in recent years I'm not so convinced.

When I attended the Ward 1, 4, and 5 consultation sessions I wasn't just listening to the Mayor's presentation. I was also watching the reaction of other residents in the sessions. Their responses as reflected in their remarks and questions ranged from bewilderment to frustration to anger. At the end of the Ward 5 meeting I asked the mayor a simple question: what three themes or perceptions resonated most clearly with you as a result of these consultation hearings. The answer she gave was unclear. Allow me to share with you what I heard.

First, there is no appetite in this community for tax increases in the magnitude of an 8.03% increase in the City's budget. Mixing it in with the Region and the Board of Education's portion of the overall assessment to yield 4.97% doesn't render it any more palatable. Many members of this community, like Canadians everywhere, are tapped out. We have a significant number of residents in Burlington who are seniors living on fixed incomes. We have younger residents who work two or three gig jobs in order to make ends meet. We have an increasing number of immigrants struggling to find work. We have Millennials who are frustrated trying to get established in their careers. And we have those battling to keep a roof over their heads, feed their kids and pay their bills. Reality check: most of us out here are not receiving 4 or 6% wage increases.

Second, if this city expects residents to foot tax increases to the level you are proposing then it is incumbent on this Council to exercise greater financial constraint. What I heard repeatedly in session after session were questions about programs and initiatives this city supports that offer

marginal value and limited utility. Paying folks \$500 in the Love your Neighbour campaign to host neighbourhood parties in the interests of promoting community spirit and engagement is unnecessary. Paying up to \$10,000 in the Neighbourhood Community Matching Fund is another extravagance we can't afford. If you have to pay residents to provide you with feedback through the "Food for Feedback" program is it really reflective, considered and honest input, or are they simply telling you what you want to hear?

There were repeated questions in meetings about the ineffectiveness of Service Burlington. There were questions around free bus service, a wonderful and laudable idea in theory, but one that has not been examined thoroughly. I heard questions about the Bateman property, and what were the actual costs of refurbishing that facility. There were a myriad of questions about what this city chooses to prioritize, and whether it is actually worthwhile or necessary.

This city, like other communities, spends monies on software and technology. What about the possibility of a shared services model with Oakville, Milton or Halton Hills to acquire expensive services and technologies and share them across different platforms? The Ontario government utilizes a shared services model across different ministries for everything from routine procurement purchases through to enterprise-wide systems and software. Why can't the same model be applied across different communities? Moreover, why can't more expensive products and equipment be shared between municipalities? Do I really care whether the by-law enforcement or public works vehicle says "City of Burlington" or "Town of Oakville" on the side? Probably not.

Third, I heard residents ask about where were the efforts to increase city revenues. The mayor said in one meeting the city would have to save \$4 million, or find revenues of equivalent value, to produce a 1% reduction in the tax rate. I suggested the Vacant Homes Tax. The mayor referenced a complicated report indicating it wasn't practical in spite of the fact it is being implemented in Hamilton, Toronto and Ottawa, and has raised more than \$120 million in British Columbia. The report claims that less than 700 homes were vacant. My rebuttal is two-fold. One, tap into hydro and water usage rates, and find out which residences are lower than the norm. Vacant homes don't run washing machines, dryers, dishwashers, internet, etc. Two, the city doesn't have to survey every residence. Simply profile and survey luxury homes such as the ones on Lakeshore Road to see who actually lives there, and if they are being lived in. Then, maybe, when you undertake these measures, I and others might put some credence in the city's report and believe there isn't revenue generation potential here.

Finally, here is something I also saw and heard...repeatedly. I heard multiple offers from residents, retired professionals and persons with expertise in areas such as finance, information technology and procurement, offer their expertise to review and identify areas for potential cost savings. The city spends a lot of time and a lot of effort talking about engagement and exploring ideas for improvement in public services. It's time to put theory into practice. While the city's efforts this year in budget consultation were admittedly an improvement over the past, there is much more that needs to be done. Engaging a cross-section of professionals with broader, extensive private sector experience, and inviting them to participate in the actual development of a draft budget

before it is disseminated for wider public consultation, not only leverages their expertise but promotes the issue of broader engagement and consensus. Frankly, consensus is not something you have with this budget.

In closing, when one person tells you there is a problem you can choose to ignore it. When dozens of residents and taxpayers tell you there is a problem perhaps you need to heed their advice. Substantial tax increases are simply unacceptable. Which leaves me with my final question: what will you, our council, do to reduce what appears to be extreme increases in the proposed 2025 budget?

Thank you.

Respectfully submitted:

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Stephen F. White". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned above the typed name.

Stephen F. White
Secretary
Burlington Residents' Action Group ("BRAG")

whitesf7134@gmail.com
(905) 510-9478