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Swollen tax bills are a levy on lethargy

BY ELIZABETH JAMES, SPECIAL TO NORTH SHORE NEWS AUGUST 3, 2011

"In general, as cities, states and countries around the world are finding out, the only thing that really stops the gravy train is a train wreck."

Margaret Wente, Globe and Mail, July 21, 2011

LET us be honest.

If any of us had a municipal job and a mighty mortgage and were paid many thousands a year more than our neighbour would for similar private-sector work, would we turn it down?

If we had built a career in the corporate world and were offered a fattened pension to buy our continued loyalty to a Crown corporation, would we say, "Oh no, really; that's too much," and walk away from the gravy?

Like it or not, we have no one to blame for the gravy problem but ourselves; the high cost of government is the result of public apathy. It's not an attitude we can afford to maintain.

The free-wheeling tax-and-spend attitudes we bought into in better economic times are unsustainable in today's world; middle-class taxpayers are buckling under government budgets swollen by salaries, benefits and services packages they can no longer afford.

Meanwhile, this province has a child poverty rate that consistently hovers around 25 per cent, which means a great number of adult British Columbians are also living in poverty.

Then we have workingpoor families who pay more than half their income for a roof and food on the table, and a growing demographic of house-poor seniors.

Short of a train wreck, what can be done to right the balance?

The HST bait-and-switch fiasco, rising hydro rates and the threat of more TransLink levies have made it obvious our problems cannot be solved by piling on more taxes for the services we demand.

Locally, we must curb our own appetites and ask councils to provide only the fundamental services municipal governments were convened to supply - and to curtail Metro Vancouver's mandate-creep.

If enough of us want frills - parades, fireworks, festivals and the like - then we should scramble to organize events ourselves; and if community support isn't forthcoming, then we must do without.

Most of all, we don't ask governments to buy extras for us on credit.

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As reader Richard Downey wrote in the North Shore News on Mar. 18, an amalgamation declaration is overdue.

So we amalgamate the three North Shore municipalities, the services they deliver, and the departments that deliver them.

Readers may not like the idea - in some ways, I don't either - but perhaps it's time someone told us, "Tough; that's the way it has to be if you want affordable services to continue."

Amalgamation would free up at least two multi-million-dollar properties - now occupied by municipal halls - to pay for the transition and put money in the bank.

Then we ask the new council to grasp the political nettle and combine emergency services, site them in shared physical locations, and tell the two unions to get along or else.

With some exceptions, it makes little sense to see Globe writer Margaret Wente's "million-dollar" firetrucks playing pilot to the ambulances screaming along behind them to purely medical events.

The reality is that with education, modern building codes, materials and construction methods, there are fewer fires.

So although coverage of round-the-clock shifts remains essential, we need to think outside the box about integrating the job descriptions of emergency services personnel.

Could firefighters also be qualified as paramedics? Could paramedics receive training as hard-to-find hospital emergency-room personnel?

I don't have the answers, but these taxpayer-supported discussions have occurred in the District of North Vancouver since before Gary Calder was fire chief and former councillor Maureen McKeon-Holmes lobbied for improved emergency services in Seymour.

As for amalgamation of departments and services, it has been expensively laughable to watch the public-works examples along the east-west corridor of the North Shore.

Each administration - from two senior governments to Port Metro Vancouver to Metro Vancouver and the three North Shore municipalities - has been a law unto itself as discrete projects expend taxpayer dollars.

The list is endless; but one thing is certain: governments and union negotiators alike must accept that there is no more gravy train; there is only one, increasingly militant, taxpayer.

So if my ideas are unacceptable, then someone needs to come up with better ones - and soon.

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