

Brewhaha at City Hall

\$20,000 coffee budget safe from axe
By ZEN RURYK, CITY HALL BUREAU CHIEF

Toronto councillors may complain about the city's financial woes, but don't expect them to give up their free coffee.

Toronto's budget committee yesterday rejected a call to save taxpayers \$20,000 annually by getting rid of the free coffee, creamers and milk available in a City Hall servery used by city councillors and their staff.

"That's a frill that council needs to be looking at cutting given our financial restraints," insisted Councillor Karen Stintz, who argued people can buy their own coffee at a first-floor cafeteria in City Hall.

Budget committee member Paul Ainslie -- the councillor who formally pushed to scrap the free coffee -- also wanted to score savings of \$30,000 a year by doing away with the paper, pens and other office supplies that are available for the use of councillors.

The city could save an additional \$20,000, according to Ainslie's plan, by reducing the \$80,000 budget earmarked for food and beverages at meetings to \$60,000 a year.

The budget committee voted against making those cuts, as well.

"It's only small items, but I think we should be leading by example," said Ainslie.

The city's proposed \$7.8-billion budget incorporates property tax hikes of 3.8% on homeowners and 1.26% on businesses. This year's financial plan calls for the province to give the city \$71 million.

Ainslie noted Toronto's 44 councillors have an annual office budget of \$53,100

which they can use to purchase such things as coffee makers.

"If I buy supplies, that's where I get them from. I don't go to the free cupboard in the clerks' department," he said.

Councillor Giorgio Mammoliti uttered the words "stupid, idiotic, dumb" when addressing Ainslie's initiative.

He complained that city councillors are singled out when it comes to finding savings at budget time.

"Everybody in the city pays attention to the lowest budgets that are given in the city -- and those are councillors. Lowest wages -- with all due respect -- are to the councillors when you compare them to all of the other directors and everyone else in the city," he said. "At budget time, everybody wants to talk about councillors."

He said while the councillors are looking at "nickeling and diming" themselves, millions of dollars could be saved if spending reduction initiatives were directed at all municipal departments.

He said that if financial cuts are continually imposed on councillors, elected representative will eventually be reduced to rubber stamping plans from city bureaucrats.

The budget committee voted to spend \$455,000 to keep open seven outdoor pools that were slated for closure.

City council will finalize its budget later this month.