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## Councillors vote to add not cut

Parks committee wants another \$8.4 million in programs

Colleagues are 'abdicating responsibility,' says budget chief

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Faced with an urgent need to eliminate a \$344 million budget shortfall, Toronto councillors instead added another \$8.4 million in spending yesterday.

Members of the economic development and parks committee voted to spend \$5 million for a SARS economic recovery plan, mainly to woo tourists back; \$1.4 million in extra grants, mostly to the Toronto Arts Council; \$315,000 for other cultural programs, and \$1.7 million extra for parks and recreation.

Among specific items, Councillor David Shiner (Ward 24, Willowdale) persuaded the committee to spring for \$3,000 for a "morality light" to discourage teenage drinking in a park in his ward.

The extra spending had not been supported by the city's top bureaucracy, which has tabled a proposed \$6.7 billion operating budget that contains a shortfall of \$344 million. That shortfall will require \$40 million in cuts, \$193 million from the province, \$78 million from city-owned Toronto Hydro and a \$33 million residential tax hike.

Councillor Case Ootes, a member of the committee, said yesterday's moves don't help the city's cause in pleading with the provincial government for cash.

"The kind of thing we're doing today sends the kind of message that says we're not willing to make the hard decisions that should be made," said Ootes (Ward 29, Toronto-Danforth).

"Queen's Park is going to look at this and say, 'You guys can't make the hard decisions so why should we bail you out?'"

Even though the committee turned down its staff's cost-saving suggestions, it liked the ideas to raise revenues. Increased user fees include hiking ice rental rates by 3 per cent, raising adult fitness fees by \$5 to \$50; hiking general camp fees by \$5 to \$30; and charging \$1 an hour to park at regional parks, including Edwards Gardens, James Gardens, High Park, and Sunnybrook, G. Ross Lord and Marie Curtis.

The economic development and parks committee was the first to review its budget. Other standing committees will do the same throughout this week.

The standing committee recommendations will be presented to the budget committee, which in turn will make its recommendations to city council, with the budget set in April.

Councillor David Soknacki, chair of the budget committee, said the economic development and parks committee's failure to trim costs may mean the budget committee will do it for them.

"It's an abdication of responsibility," said Soknacki (Ward 43, Scarborough East). Councillor Brian Ashton, the chair of economic development and parks, said his committee's job is to protect programs, not gut them.

"Absolutely, there's an advocacy role," said Ashton (Ward 36, Scarborough Southwest).