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City Budget Presentation – March 2, 2010

Good afternoon, and thank you for this opportunity to speak with you briefly regarding the City's operating budget for 2010.

I am pleased to speak on behalf of Social Planning Toronto, whose almost 200 member agencies represent a wide cross-section of the non-profit community agencies providing a broad range of prevention, support, and direct service to people across Toronto.

Part of our role is to provide our member organizations with information about policy decisions at all levels of government that have a potential impact on their work, and in that context, Social Planning Toronto held a member forum on the City Budget on February 18. Councillor Carroll was extremely helpful in framing the overall context of the budget, the particular challenges faced by the City in this year of recession and election, as well as in outlining the specific implications for organizations receiving funding through the Community Partnership Investment Program.

From that presentation, and the discussions which followed it, Social Planning Toronto would like to express our overall support of the direction of the budget – in tough times, it appears to have struck an appropriate balance between maintaining critical services and generating the revenue required to do this in a responsible manner.

That having been said, we would like to identify four issues which we feel require the Budget Committee's further consideration.

The first is the proposed increase in fees for the City's recreation activities. While there may be some justification for incremental adjustments to keep fees in line with inflation, the imposition of entirely new fees, such as the \$50 charge for families registering for recreation programs for the first time, is a significant step backwards. While the Welcome Policy offers relief for those sufficiently destitute and desperate enough to access it, the imposition of these new charges will hit hardest at the working poor – the families that are just scraping by, where any additional charge may mean the difference between being able to participate and not, between a child being in a properly supervised program and being a "latchkey kid". Our research indicates that less than 10% of children between 6 and 12 in Toronto are in a five-day a week, supervised after school program. The City has recognized in its work the need to expand these programs. Access to recreation is one key component in delivering on the after-school needs of children. We are particularly concerned that the \$50 set-up charge for new families will hit newcomer families hovering just above the poverty line the hardest, and push those children through the cracks. This fee in particular diminishes the City's ability to be the welcoming new home for newcomer families. Is the limited revenue generated by these increases worth the cost to these kids, their families, and our city?



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Similarly, we would ask you to reconsider the proposed reduction in Sunday library operating hours. Toronto's public library system is one in which we can all take pride, and it is an important resource for people of all ages and in many of our most underserved communities. Again, the proposed savings from this budget reduction would not appear to be worth the cost.

You are hearing from many childcare advocates about the potential impact of the changes being proposed to the rental relationships between the City and the Boards of Education for in-school childcares. In a year when the childcare system is reeling from continued neglect from the Federal government, uncertainty from the Province as it begins to implement early learning, and Boards of Education that continue to have to "rob Peter to pay Paul", the city's move to adjust these rental arrangements may make it part of the problem, rather than part of the solution. We would encourage the City to review this proposal to make sure that its full impact is taken into account, and to work with the Boards of Education to fully understand, and mitigate, any negative impact on childcare in the City.

Last year, the City passed the HOT plan, an important 10-year affordable housing strategy for Toronto. The importance of a long-term sustainable affordable housing plan for Toronto is evident in every neighbourhood, in our shelters and on our streets. While we appreciate that senior orders of government need to pull their weight to make the plan a reality, we also look to the City to provide seed funding to advance the plan. There's no indication in the operating budget how the City will do this. We recommend that the City take a second look at how the operating budget can advance the HOT plan. One thing the City can do to advance housing issues, without spending a dime, is to make the decision to allocate 50% of all Section 37 funds from developers to go toward affordable housing initiatives in the City's wards.

Finally, we would strongly urge you to re-instate the principle that the Community Partnership and Investment Program should include an economic factor increase. The cost to the City of maintaining this principle is limited – somewhere between \$250,000 and \$1 million on the entire Grants budget. This continued investment enables your community partners to maintain service levels, to keep programs going, and to plan rationally for the future, knowing that there is a recognition that they are subject to the same kinds of cost increases as everyone else. Flatlining the Community Service Partnership envelope is, in fact, reducing it by the degree of inflation, and among the first things to vanish in that reduction is the capacity of organizations to innovate, to respond to emerging concerns, and to develop the initiatives, relationships, and practices that will, in the long run, reduce both social and economic costs.

All three of the issues we have identified involve relatively small amounts of funding, but all of them share long-term implications. We would encourage you to re-visit these three areas, and make these small, but critical, investments in our children and our communities.

Thank you again for the hard work you have done in crafting this budget, and for this opportunity to speak with you this afternoon.