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Parks board should fight \$1.9m in cuts, says NPA commissioner Robertson

BY CHRISTINA MONTGOMERY, THE PROVINCE APRIL 9, 2009

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 Ian Robertson
 Photograph by: Jon Murray,
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Should the parties controlling the Vancouver parks board be fighting harder against the city's plan to cut \$1.9 million from the park budget? Ian Robertson, the board's lone NPA commissioner, thinks so.

Robertson says he's as bothered by the hefty cut -- "the largest single reduction in our history" -- as he is by the "lack of advocacy" from what he calls the "Vision Vancouver/COPE" board.

But his accusations have Vision and COPE commissioners groaning.

In 2008, when the NPA dominated city council, it told the parks board to cut the park budget by about \$400,000. The NPA-run parks board tried to pass the proposed cut, but with one of its members absent from the vote, opposition Vision, COPE and independent commissioners banded together to reject the proposal.

Korina Houghton, then-NPA chairwoman of the board, called the feisty vote by opposition members an insult to parks staff and dismissed the vote as political grandstanding.

Robertson, who voted for last year's proposed cut, says this year's is different. It's far too deep, even given the tough economic times -- and he wants the present ruling parties to fight back.

"I'm mindful of the challenging economic times. I'm not objecting to [making any cut at all]. We all take cuts," he said. "It's more the lack of leadership." City council has also asked the board to increase its revenues by \$1.7 million, something Robertson says will be tough.

The board missed its revenue target by \$1 million in 2008 and the areas where fees can be increased -- golf, parking, restaurants -- eventually dry up if the fees are hiked too high, he said.

"I don't mind if we don't plant as many flowers, but I draw the line when we begin to have discussions around hours of pools and rinks, some beaches not being patrolled." COPE commissioner Loretta Woodcock says Robertson's argument about a lack of leadership is wrong.

The board met repeatedly with the city about cuts during this "extraordinary economic period," she said, and is monitoring how they play out month by month.

More than \$1 million of the savings have been found by not hiring replacement and other staff as needed, she said. The results are reported monthly at public finance committee meetings and if they begin to cut into core services, they'll be reconsidered, she said.

No core services -- including community-centre programs -- are being cut, she insisted.

Since 1996, the parks board has been dealt a total of nearly \$3 million in cuts, which have been met by reducing outdoor maintenance, interior cleaning and maintenance and hiking fees at community centres and marinas.

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