

What would you do with \$163 million?

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If you're a politician in power, budgetary surpluses are recorded in the plus side of the political ledger. They are irrefutable proof of your skills as a financial planner and steward of the public trust - someone who's careful with other people's money.

On the other hand, if you're an opposition politician, you look at the books a little differently. A budgetary surplus is nothing less than proof positive the party in power has been overtaxing the electorate, milking the populace for money it didn't need.

"First, I'd raise the budgets of all the boroughs," Montreal opposition leader Pierre Bourque says when asked what he'd do with the \$163-million budgetary surplus announced this week by city hall. "Then, I'd reduce the administration (costs).

"This (surplus) comes from the fact the real estate market is very good. But we can't foresee that's going to be the case in the coming years. ... The tax burden is going to be terrible in the coming years."

Bourque calculates \$200 million in tax bumps from "the pockets of the citizens" laid the foundation for the surplus.

He also worries that running around telling people you've found extra cash will put a crimp in city hall's other pastime - trying to shake down Ottawa and Quebec City for more cash.

"(Prime Minister Stephen) Harper's priority isn't cities. (Premier Jean) Charest's, either."

A point of view rarely, if ever, heard in this debate is that of the taxpayers, whose money sparked the debate in the first place.

For that silent majority, the distinctions made by political adversaries over the nature of their budgetary windfall are irrelevant. After all, what does it matter if the glass is half-empty or half- full when you're the one paying for the water?

The real bottom line here is that for whatever reason, city hall has more cash - your cash - than it needs. While there seems to be a certain moral symmetry to the possibility that money will be returned to you, that possibility is about as mathematically probable as your hitting the Super 7 on Friday.

That is why the city of Montreal, when it announced this week it had racked up a \$163-million surplus in 2005, didn't even pause for breath to let the news sink in before detailing how most of that money had been plowed right back into the swirling churn of municipal finances.

Once they'd finished balancing this year's budget, topped up a reserve fund for unforeseen expenses and dealt with "various other requirements," a total of \$102.3 million had been burned off.

Then there was the distribution of \$35.9 million to the island's boroughs, part of which came from the surpluses they'd generated on their own (borough books and those kept at city hall being largely separate accounting exercises). That leaves \$24.8 million.

That's what the experts have done with their surplus - your money.

But what about you? What would you do? If it was in your power to point \$163 million to improve this city and the lives of those who live in it, where would you spend?

We'd like to hear from you about how you'd improve this city, armed only with your imagination and \$163 million of public money. Potholes or public housing, more green space or garbage pickups - it's your money, your shopping list, and you're buying for the island of Montreal.

Send me your ideas at the email address below or leave them on a voice mail message at (514) 987-2594. We'll publish as many of your responses as we can. And who knows? Maybe the next time city hall is up to its ears in your money, they'll know how to spend it.

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