

Paring welfare rolls nets Ottawa \$4.1M reward

City surpasses target numbers in provincial workfare scheme

By ZEV SINGER

The City of Ottawa has been given \$4.1 million by the province for surpassing its targets for the number of people the city removed from the welfare rolls.

The gift, about which councillors learned only two days ago, will mean an increase in services from the agencies that help the city's poorest residents.

Because of the timing, the announcement will have a significant impact on what happens in budget deliberations in today's health, recreation and social services committee meeting at city hall.

Under the provincial workfare scheme, for the year ending in March 2002, the city was required to have 30 per cent of its 18,000 welfare recipients either in jobs or unpaid community placements.

Instead, the city got the number up to 45 per cent 33 per cent community placements and 12 per cent jobs. Built-in incentives entitle the city to the \$4.1 million

As a result, today's committee meeting will rise a level in intensity. Up against a budget that cuts services and raises fees, the committee was already set to face a long lineup of presentations from social service agencies shut out of any new funds by the staff-recommended city budget.

With the announced new money, the meeting will be even better attended.

But Councillor Alex Munter, chairman of the health, recreation and social services committee, says that while he understands that every agency will want to make its case, he doesn't want to pick and choose the winners and losers, in today's meeting.

Instead, Mr. Munter hopes his colleagues on the com-

mittee will back his idea of laying out criteria for who gets the money and letting staff determine who qualifies.

The top priorities, in his view, are health and safety and funding cost increases that were "unavoidable" for the agencies.

Mr. Munter said that for the most part, he doesn't favour using the new money to offset service cuts and fee hikes in recreation.

"I don't think we should be giving social services money to extend wading pool hours", he said.

While most of the recreational fee increases are likely to pass, Mr. Munter said he will urge council to increase the pool for subsidies for families that can't afford the increases.

One fee increase Mr. Munter said he would fight against is that for summer camps, which averages to an increase of \$5 per week.

"I didn't get into politics to make it harder for kids to go to summer camp," he said.

Mr. Munter, meanwhile, is treating the announcement of the \$4.1 million as a vindication for the city, which took a stand against a provincial policy two years ago.

At that time, the province refused to count the employment placements as part of the quota, counting only the voluntary placements. In the spring of 2000, the province changed its quota to allow the employment placements to count.

Mr. Munter said that the success, and its financial reward, prove that "Ottawa's way works better."

"Our focus has always been not on keeping people busy but on giving people the opportunity they need to get real jobs", Mr. Munter said.

