SOCIAL JUSTICE STRATEGIC COMMITTEE

Presentation to the Emergency and Community Services Committee

March 2, 2011

Members of the Emergency and Community Services Committee:

My name is Dave Cherkewski and I am representing the Social Justice Strategic Committee speaking to the staff report on Ontario Municipal Partnership (OMPF) Reconciliation Re-Investment.

We spoke to you in January at which time we thought the staff report was going to be discussed. A copy of our presentation from that day is attached.

At that time:

1. We expressed concern that OMPF reconciled dollars were put into physical infrastructure and not put back into social services.
2. We asked that a Social Investment Strategy be created as a long term strategy that would include a community consultation process.
3. We drew your attention to the need for a short term strategy that would make investments to address the dire situations facing unattached individuals on social assistance.

We would like to comment on each of these items in context of the report before you.

OMPF dollars

We are pleased that the staff recommends that 50% of the reconciled dollars from the year 2009 go to the Social Services Initiative Fund.

We believe, however all (100%) of the reconciled dollars should go to that fund.

Staff back up their argument for the 50/50 (Social Services/Capital Reserve) by citing an “informal survey of a few municipalities” (page 4) suggesting that “most, similar to Hamilton, applied the funding to support general or corporate initiatives.” Who are these similar municipalities? On page nine we are told they are Peel Region, the City of London, and the
Town of Ingersoll. This doesn’t seem to be a very thorough analysis. Niagara, for example, put their reconciled dollars “back” into social services.

We are also concerned that staff’s rationale for not replenishing to social services the $3.1 dollars spent on infrastructure is based partially on Council’s approval last year of $2 million for the Neighbourhood Strategies. While we are pleased that the city is taking this important initiative to support neighbourhoods these ‘yet to be developed’ strategies must not be confused with the specific goals and objectives that have been established for poverty reduction.

Finally, staff’s statement that their recommendations are “premised on the City’s Strategic Plan focus areas of financial sustainability and social development” (page 3) seems to the omit the Healthy Community and Human Services focus articulated in the Strategic Plan.

If the E&CS wishes to support the staff recommendation for a 50/50 split it is our view that those dollars allocated to Unallocated Capital Reserves be applied specifically to the capital requirements of the social housing portfolio thereby providing a benefit to low income Hamilton residents.

**Social Investment Strategy**

Consistent with our comments from earlier this year we support the development of a Social Investment Strategy. We had, however, envisaged that such a strategy would be informed by considerable community consultation. As well, we imagined the ongoing decisions made as part of this Strategy would involve broad community representation. We can’t find this in the report and believe it is an oversight. In preparing this response our group met with Tom Cooper of the HRPR and understand that his organization shares our view.

**Investments to Address the Situations facing Unattached Individuals on Social Assistance**

In our previous delegation we noted that welfare incomes fall “far below most socially accepted measures of adequacy” but we were particularly concerned about those unattached individuals receiving Ontario Works living in poverty in Hamilton. Unattached individuals experience a rate of poverty nearly double the rate of child poverty which we are working so hard to address in Hamilton.

Our presentation in January was referred back to staff to “report back during the budget process, with recommendations on how to enhance social service funds” and we hope the issue of the dire situations facing unattached individuals on social assistance will not be forgotten.
In closing, we regret that this report wasn’t available to us until mid-day Monday of this week making it difficult for us to convene our members and develop a consensus around this presentation. More time to consider it would have been helpful to us.

In the event that a deferral is not feasible or desirable we would appreciate your consideration of the opinions we have expressed today.

In summary, then, while the staff recommendation of 50% of 2009 reconciled OMPF dollars being allocated to Social Services Initiative Fund is a positive development over last year’s situation, our preference would be for Council to direct all (100%) of the reconciled dollars to that fund.

As our second choice if Council is of a mind to allocate 50% of the reconciled dollars to capital we would request that it specifically go to the capital requirements of the social housing portfolio of Community Housing Hamilton.
Chair and Members of the Emergency and Community Services Committee:

My name is Dave Cherkewski and I represent the Social Justice Strategic Committee. Many of the committee members are with me today.

We were established more than seven years ago to provide a forum for the exchange of information, discussion, and formulation of advice regarding the policies and major initiatives of the Community Services Department of the City of Hamilton (CSC) in order to improve the quality of life for those receiving services provided by Ontario Works (OW), and ODSP. Our terms of reference direct us to review new policies and programs of the CSD in a timely fashion so that advice can be given while plans are under development.

In our meetings with the General Manager of Community Services we have become aware that the City is developing a Social Investment Strategy. We understand that this strategy will identify resources and develop a policy framework to enhance the social infrastructure of Hamilton.

We strongly support the idea of such a Social Investment Strategy. There are a number of reasons for our support.

Why We Support a Social Investment Strategy
First, Council is well aware of the well documented challenges facing this community with roughly one in five of our citizens living in poverty. While there has been a high level of recognition of these challenges and many excellent initiatives undertaken, the uploading of social assistance costs (and to a lesser extent the possibility of more reconciled Ontario Municipal Partnership (OMPF) dollars being available) presents the opportunity to think strategically about how to allocate these resources. We should be ready to put forward enhancements to offset significant needs when dollars become available.

Last year Council diverted reconciled dollars from OMPF into public works programs. As this fund assists municipalities with their social program costs we, and many others in the community, were surprised by this decision. Other municipalities put those dollars back into social services. That makes sense and seems logical from where we sit.

However, after meeting with staff last fall we appreciate that they have a different interpretation of where these dollars should go.

But surely, in a community that is vocal about tackling poverty, in a city that has as an aspiration to be “The Best Place to Raise a Child” there needs to be better process in place to allocate scarce resources.

A Social Investment Strategy, then, offers an opportunity to put a sound, transparent process in place to strategically address problems facing those with low incomes and those living in poverty in our community.

We envision setting up a body like the Future Fund Board of Directors which would include broad community representation and particularly, and most importantly, those with lived experience. Such a body would develop clear goals and expectations and would prepare a strategy and bring it back to Council for approval in a timely manner.

The Need for a Short Term Response
This will take time to put in place. In the short term we understand that consideration will soon be given as part of this year’s budget process to addressing issues before a Social Investment Strategy is in place.

In the short term, then, our group believes that investments should be made to address the situations facing unattached individuals on social assistance.

We are all aware that welfare incomes fall “far below most socially accepted measures of adequacy.” But the worst-off have always been single people considered employable.

In Hamilton, as Deirdre Pike wrote in last weekend’s Spectator 26,277 unattached individuals in Hamilton were living in poverty in 2005. The rate of poverty for that population was 42 per cent, almost double the rate of child poverty for that same year.

Approximately 5,000 current Ontario Works recipients are unattached individuals, trying to live off less than $600 a month.

In 1993 these individuals would have received a maximum of $663 per month.

In 1995 that was lowered to $520 per month.

Now the figure is only $592 per month – down 11% from 1993.

There are no fruits and vegetables in that monthly budget; no bus pass to get you to those potential job interviews; no money for dental hygiene so you can present yourself proudly if you’re able to snag a job interview; no money to fully participate in community life with dignity.

Our group is quite aware that the municipality can do little to change provincially determined social assistance rates but we believe the municipality has some flexibility to address the needs of its residents.
One idea that has merit was put forward by Councillor Clark at a Board of Health meeting last fall. Councillor Clark’s suggestion involved consideration of a Hamilton pilot project. Following a program called **Put Food in the Budget** this pilot would feature an immediate increase of $100 per month for every adult receiving social assistance as a first step towards addressing the inadequacy of current social assistance benefits.

I have direct experience with the social assistance system so could answer questions on that or other matters related to this presentation.

We appreciate your consideration of our ideas.

January 19, 2011