Budget opacity and arcanity

❧ *5th in a series of posts on the 2020 Budget* ❧

Did you see this recent comment by Peter Crownfield on a recent post ?

"Municipal budget books seem to be designed to make things opaque or difficult to understand. . . . Do you suppose keeping things arcane [good SAT word, Peter] is one reason why it is done the way it is?"

Exactly.

Gadfly's been meaning to hatch one of his beautiful (!) "Modest Proposals" on this very subject.

Gadfly was a writing teacher for a hundred years.

One of the first principles of good writing is to identify your audience.

"Who is your audience?" Gadfly would intone pregnantly and poignantly.

The audience determines your approach, your tone of voice, your writing strategies — everything.

The 2020 budget is an accounting document for accountants — it seems.

2020 Proposed Budget

It is not written for the public. It is not public-friendly.

It does not encourage public knowledge, participation, conversation.

It does not invite public engagement.

Most of what the general public sees as it meets and then thumbs through the budget is off-putting.

Most should be in an appendix in a document aimed at the general public.

Gadfly is writing in haste here (grandkids' soccer!!!), but what he's been thinking about is a document (online) that begins with a visual of the City organizational chart.

CITYORGN Oct 22 2019

An easily understandable map of City structure.

And then each block would have linked to it a budget "narrative."

Some of the info narrative for each block is already in the current budget book.

For instance, go to p. 72 in **2020 Proposed Budget:** Planning and Zoning.

There you will find the "Bureau Description," "Goals and Objectives," and "Prior Year Achievements."

Good.

Gadfly would add such categories as "This Year's Goals" and "Projects Deferred" (what we'd do if we had more money), and "Impact on This Year's Budget."

Something like that.

Foreground this concise "narrative."

Same for each block in the organizational chart.

Then — **most importantly** — the whole document introduced by an "Executive Summary" or an "Overview": general state of revenue — up, down? general state of expenses — up, down? what factors? what priorities? what drivers? what pressures? what left on the cutting room floor? What's the goal of the budget? What were the tough choices? What the heartaches? What problem areas resolved? Where the cracks? Where the hot spots?

A snapshot. A frame. A context. An introduction.

One substantial paragraph. One page.

Could say more (and more coherently) but gotta run.

Remind me to dress warmly.