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Some Chicago City Council members consider reducing police budget after unanimous vote against \$300M property tax increase

By Tonia Hill

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Mayor Brandon Johnson and city council members meet for the 2025 budget address on October 30, 2024. Photo by Ash Lane for

2025 Budget address on October 30, 2024. Photo by Josh Lane for
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At a special meeting on Thursday, Chicago City Council members unanimously voted to shut down Mayor Brandon Johnson's \$300 million property tax increase proposal, marking a symbolic and unprecedented move by the 50-person council.

Dick Simpson, professor emeritus of political science at the University of Illinois at Chicago, called the council's decision to bring the property tax increase up for a vote before approving the budget "unusual." It hasn't been done in Chicago within the last 50 years, he said. Typically after a budget proposal is introduced, the City Council's Committee on Budget and Government Operations hosts a series of budget hearings with department heads. So, the property tax hike vote came before the completion of budget hearings that kicked off on Nov. 6.

In the recent past, mayors Richard M. Daley, Rahm Emanuel, and Lori Lightfoot each raised property taxes during their tenures to help close budget gaps; in fact, Emanuel's 2016 budget included the largest property tax increase in Chicago history. For the 2025 fiscal year, Johnson is facing a **nearly \$1 billion budget shortfall**.

"The budget and related taxes are typically passed either unanimously or with no more than 10 or 15 aldermen in opposition," said Simpson, who served as 44th Ward alderman from 1971 to 1979.

The unanimous vote happened quickly, without debate. It's a reflection of the council's growing split from mayors, a dynamic that began slightly shifting under Emanuel and later Lightfoot, showing increased independence from the mayor's wishes, according to Simpson.

"The current City Council began to change after Rahm Emanuel. Under Mayor Lightfoot, there were four factions in the City Council, but she was able to win the votes by getting support from two of the factions, the progressive alderman and what might be called the moderate liberal alderman," Simpson said. The other two factions during Lightfoot's administration were the conservative bloc and the Chicago Machine bloc.

There are three in Johnson's administration: progressive aldermen, conservatives, and moderate liberals.

Thursday's vote was symbolic in nature, signaling to the Johnson administration that alders and their constituents are united in opposing property tax increases. They instead want alternative solutions to close the nearly \$1 billion deficit that is due in part to rising pension

costs and the loss of COVID-19 federal relief dollars that are set to expire in 2026.

“Voters are saying we are fed up with rising property taxes. It’s unfortunate that our hands are tied by Springfield in terms of what progressive or alternative revenue options we can pursue,” Ald. Carlos Ramirez-Rosa (35th Ward) told reporters following the vote. “The vote today reflected the frustration that’s felt in our communities from our homeowners and property owners, who are struggling to keep up.”



Alderman Carlos Ramirez-Rosa of the 35th Ward at a City Council meeting on Jan 31, 2024. Photo by Ash Lane for The TRIIBE®

For Ramirez-Rosa and “a number of aldermen,” he said, reducing the Chicago Police Department’s budget is something worth looking into as a solution to closing the budget gap.

Although he did not name names, Ramirez-Rosa noted that some alderpersons — including those who previously did not support calls to defund the police — are open to examining the 2.09 billion CPD budget more closely to identify potential savings.

The police budget makes up about 35 percent of the city’s corporate fund, the largest of the

city's six funds, used to fund city services and programs.

"There's no question that we absolutely have to look at where those dollars are going and if they're being well spent. It's similar to the Department of Defense budget," Ramirez-Rosa explained. In Johnson's budget proposal, CPD would see a proposed increase due to salary adjustments.

"Look at how much of our federal tax dollars go to the Department of Defense, and there's so much waste there. We have to look at the CPD budget with a fine tooth comb to figure out what options are available to us to reduce spending there because it is the lion's share of the budget," Ramirez-Rosa added.

When asked by *The TRIIBE* if he supports reducing the police budget, Johnson said the department is seeing cuts within parts of his budget proposal. For example, Johnson's budget calls for cuts in the department's Office of Constitutional Policing and Reform. However, that decision is being questioned by [Illinois Attorney General Kwame Raoul](#) because CPD is under a court-ordered consent decree due to its decades-long pattern of abuse and police misconduct. Workers within the Office of Constitutional Policing and Reform oversee the police department's compliance with the federal consent decree. CPD Supt. Larry Snelling is expected to provide testimony during the department's budget hearing at City Hall at 10:00 am on Nov. 15.

"We have to examine everything closer, and it's about time," Johnson said. "All of the alders standing beside me today have led courageously to open up a more collaborative process, and I am here for it."

PROPOSALS TO RAISE PROPERTY TAXES AREN'T NEW IN CHICAGO

Simpson has published numerous studies and books on elections and [voting patterns of elected officials in the City Council](#). He said it's not unusual for alders to balk on property tax hikes. It happened under previous administrations, too.

"In the case of Brandon Johnson, however, the City Council, like many of the citizens, has tended to lose confidence in his administration. That is, they tend to think that the administration is incompetent. They want to know, well, why should we have to raise this \$300 million? Is there no other option possible?"

On the campaign trail, Johnson promised not to increase property taxes. Simpson continued. "They're [acting] like [how] political parties would be at the national or state level," he said, referring to the different factions within the City Council. "It means you get better arguments. You get other ideas from each of the different points of view, and that should lead to better governmental decisions."

In response to City Council's unanimous vote, Johnson spoke to the legislative process under previous administrations which, he said, wasn't as collaborative. While he addressed the media in a post-council press conference, several alders stood behind him in solidarity: Pat Dowell (3rd Ward), William Hall (6th Ward), Michelle Harris (8th Ward), Julia Ramirez (12th Ward), Jessie Fuentes (26th Ward), Jason Ervin (28th Ward) and Ramirez-Rosa.

These alders represent wards on the city's South, West and North sides and include a mix of different factions.

Johnson said his budgetary process is a departure from the past, when alderpersons were seen as a "rubber stamp" because they often voted in alignment with Daley, Emanuel and Lightfoot.

"We're committed to repairing the structural damage and making sure that we're investing in people and not cutting services. So, to have an opportunity where you don't have this dictatorial style and take it all at once, you have these little private conversations, maybe some out loud, but you have these conversations behind closed doors," Johnson said.

For example, in 2015, City Council members voted 35-15 to approve Emanuel's 2016 budget, which included a \$543 million property tax increase, a \$9.50 monthly garbage pickup fee, and new taxes on ride-sharing apps like Uber and Lyft. This was the largest property tax increase in Chicago history.

"You do some finagling, and then you come out with a proposal. Everybody stands, and either says yes or no. This is far more robust," Johnson said, referring to the budget process. "This is what Chicago wants. We're going to pass a balanced budget that doesn't cut services and invests in people. This is just a newer process that people get to adjust to."

It remains unclear how the Johnson administration and City Council will pivot and what alternatives it will consider to find more money. Both parties have to agree on and pass a budget by Dec. 31.

"It's up to us as members of the City Council to look at the budget, make adjustments to the budget, and come to some conclusions. So again, I don't want to characterize what anyone

does as a mistake," Ervin told reporters, referring to Johnson. "Again, it represents what the executive branch believes is best for Chicago. We as legislators have to do our part and make sure that we come to some kind of agreement."

Alderman Jason Ervin of the 28th Ward during a City Council meeting on Jan 31, 2024. Photo by Ash Lane for The TRiIBE®

Johnson reiterated that he would not cut city services or opt for furlough days for city workers.

"We're not committed to cutting services. Which day do you think Chicagoans want police officers not to be on the job, or streets and sanitation?" he asked rhetorically. "Which day do we pick to make sure that their firefighters and EMTs are no longer available? Where the money should come from is the ultra-rich in this state. We fought for that."

Reporters pressed Johnson on whether he would consider other taxes, such as the amusement tax or liquor tax. He didn't rule out the possibility of a reduced property tax hike being considered during budget season.

Asiaha Butler, a longtime Englewood resident and co-founder and CEO of R.A.G.E. (Resident Association of Greater Englewood), sees any type of property tax increase as one that would harm Black homeowners, especially those in Englewood who make up more than 90% of the population but represent less than a quarter of property owners, according to a **report** from the Woodstock Institute.

"Homeowners who live in Englewood and the potential homeowners are already very uneasy because of the housing crisis," she said.

Butler added that single-family homes and two-flats are priced between \$350,000 and about \$400,000.

"We already know in terms of a mortgage that people can't afford it, but that's extremely high. So, to couple that with an increase in property tax rates. I just don't see how this is favorable for Black communities or favorable at all for the city of Chicago," Butler continued.

Butler founded R.A.G.E. in 2010, and its mission is to create tangible solutions and mobilize residents and resources to restore Englewood. The nonprofit has a program called **Buy the Block**, where they offer training to empower Englewood residents who are interested in homeownership.

They've done 12 cohorts over the last few years for those interested in purchasing a home, and about 10% of participants go through the fast-track process to purchase a home through their program, she said.

R.A.G.E. also provides \$1,000 grants to families who purchase property in Englewood. Butler said the organization awarded two grants to Black women on Nov. 11 that bought homes.

"So not only do we try to promote and encourage more Black families to hold on to Englewood and to live in Englewood. We also work around the clock to try to sustain our current homeowners that are here," she explained.

Geoff Smith, executive director at DePaul University's Institute for Housing Studies, echoed Butler's sentiments about housing costs.

"Homeowners are increasingly getting squeezed by a range of different rising costs that aren't necessarily associated with the mortgage," Smith said. "It's those other costs, sometimes for property taxes or for insurance or for utilities or for home repairs, that can be unpredictable and can change."

Tonia Hill is a multimedia reporter for The TRiIBE.



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