

## Budgets & Bueller

by Sheralyn Roman

It's budget time. If you didn't quite get enough 'money talk' at the federal level back on November 4, the Caledon budget was released just a day later on November 5.

It's set to come before Council for discussion on November 18 at 2:30 pm. From there, it's just a short seven days before it goes to a final vote on November 25 at 7 pm. That means the budget will have gone from proposed, to approved, in just 20 days! With the budget document itself being 375 pages long that doesn't leave a lot of time for a thorough reading. I'm not even sure I could get through a good book that fast! As Ferris Bueller once said many years ago, 'Life moves pretty fast. If you don't stop and look around once in a while, you could miss it.' The budget is moving pretty fast, my friends. If you don't stop and take a look at how and where your tax dollars are being spent, you're gonna miss it.

Just like the movies love to show a preview, here's a bit of a budget highlight reel: the CAO's office has a hefty budget of \$4.5 million dollars, and there's a proposal for a 200+ seat multi-purpose theatre coming in at an estimated \$18-22 million bucks. Money has been allocated to a new fire station, and bylaw is looking to add at least one new staff member to deal with illegal trucking and another to handle residential rental licensing enforcement. Given the recent push to allow up to three ARUs on a property, that person's probably going to be as busy as the illegal trucking officer. In total, \$88 million will go toward capital expenditures and Caledon will have a \$167 million operating budget.

Likely of most concern to residents is this: 'What does the budget mean for me personally?'

Financially, whether you call it a tax increase, a levy, or as Caledon has; a budget that 'strategically supports growth by prioritizing investments to strengthen services and position Caledon for long-term success,' the bottom line is Caledon residents are looking at a 4% increase on their property taxes. That's defined as a 3% tax increase and a 1% levy (still a tax) to support critical infrastructure projects. How many of us, already hit hard by tariffs, will be able to absorb a tax increase? Worse still, while we absorb yet more hits, developers continue to be largely excused by Premier Ford from paying development charges that are meant to fund those 'critical infrastructure projects.'

We certainly can't parse an entire budget here, but I would urge concerned Caledon residents to at least take a few minutes to at least read the eight-page 'budget highlights' document. Perhaps it might resonate with you, resulting in a deeper dive into the actual budget document to see how your money is being spent and encouraging you to delegate at Council.

It may prompt questions such as: Do we really need a 200+ seat theatre to be built next to the Caledon Centre for Recreation and Wellness in Bolton? I ask that question respectfully as a diehard fan of the arts, and someone who spent a good chunk of their life singing, playing a musical instrument, and performing. But with two local theatres; The Caledon Village Townhall Players (seating approx. 140) located in Caledon Village and the Blackhorse Village Players on Mt. Wolfe, seating approx. 160 guests, (not to mention Orangeville Theatre at 270+ seats just north of us) is a theatre really our main priority right now? Investing in the arts IS necessary, just maybe not here, and not right now. Rather, we should be encouraging the Minister of Education to recognize the value of the arts and provide enhanced funding at the elementary and secondary school levels. We should be advocating hard for children and youth to be exposed to, and offered opportunities to participate in, a variety of arts and music programming while they are young. Let's get kids interested in the arts first, then think about building the future. By the way, Caledon's population is 72,000 give or take and even if we meet our current growth targets of 300,000 by 2051, we're still nowhere close to Brampton (current population 791,000) where the lovely Rose Theatre struggles to stay afloat.

There should be no argument about funding, and staffing fire stations. Safety and fast response times are in everyone's best interests. Increasing bylaw staff at a time when we are facing down innumerable threats to zoning and agricultural lands by illegal trucking repair and/or parking facilities also makes good sense. Perhaps we need even more than the two proposed bylaw officers? As well,

could those positions be dispersed differently in terms of their hours of work? I left Town Hall at around 5 p.m. after a meeting recently and counted at least five or six parked bylaw patrol cars. Bylaw infractions happen 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Maybe the budget should take that into consideration?

Let's also talk about the library. Our library system has to serve a rapidly expanding community across a 700 sq km geographic area. It demands creative thinking like providing in-branch service even when no Librarian is present. The Inglewood location is a prime example of this innovative thinking, enabling access for area residents in smaller communities, thereby keeping service levels on par with those of larger branches. This kind of access is important because it means a local teenager has access to wifi to complete a homework assignment, a job-seeker can use the computers to refine their employment search, or a stay-at-home parent/caregiver has access to books at a time when their little ones most need entertaining. I'm concerned about the fact that so little is said about the library within the budget.

Mayfield West, with thousands of new homes being built, is completely underserved and while a new branch is proposed, where is the money allocated for a permanent branch in that community? Let's not forget that libraries are also much more than a repository for books. They provide access: teaching seniors tech skills, or children and youth with opportunities to try cutting edge 3D printer equipment. They are about art, using passes to take out musical instruments, and about the outdoors, loaning out entry passes to local conservation areas and oh yeah, they offer books too, in a variety of languages, not to mention book clubs for adults, the LGBTQ community and teens.

Back to what Ferris said. If we don't stop and look around once in a while, life is going to pass us by. In this case, the life of a vibrant and growing community with strong rural roots, will change rapidly - and not necessarily for the better. It's up to each and every one of us, residents and taxpayers, to slow down, take a look at what's proposed in Caledon's 2026 budget, and then ensure your voice, and your concerns, are heard by Council. Advocate for what concerns you most because once 'it's' gone (whatever your personal 'it' is) as Ferris Bueller wisely said, 'you're going to miss it.'