

Caledon's budget is missing something ?

by SHERALYN ROMAN

At this time of year, for some local business owners or non-profits, it's budget time or year end. For others it's thoughts of holiday shopping while on a budget that concern them, and for far too many, there's no budget at all for things like rent, food and basic necessities. For the Town of Caledon, it's also budget time, a process that evolves over several months, culminating in the presentation of a proposed annual budget put before Council for their consideration and vote. In theory, it's a process that represents the input of residents, consultation between department staff and management, and predictions of anticipated costs for the coming year. All of which implies that a level of detailed care and concern should be baked into the process. I'm not entirely sure that's what happened this year and cannot help but wonder at the glaringly obvious missing pieces of the proposed 2025 municipal budget.

To the casual observer it seems there are a litany of concerns with the proposed budget, beginning with the public survey that asked Caledon residents for their input on where and how they would like to see their tax dollars spent. While the Town obviously has no control over responses, my first concern is that only 300 or so residents chose to take part, hardly a representative number of the residents who call Caledon home. Of those who did take the time to complete the questionnaire, a large percentage commented particularly on the need to address illegal trucking yards, poor traffic safety and road infrastructure conditions, and requested significantly enhanced by-law enforcement. Very little of the budget seems to address these particular concerns however, despite the fact that the town acknowledges these issues (along with fire and emergency services) as top priorities.

As I'm sure everyone knows, the budget is principally funded by property taxes. It also relies upon user fees and development charges as sources of funding, along with reserves and both federal and provincial grants. Regardless, it's taxpayers who are on the hook for a good portion of the town's budget, perhaps even more so now that Premier Ford has changed the way in which development charges are levied, or rather, potentially not levied at all.

So, who makes up the slack when developers aren't paying their fair share? This year's budget suggests it is you and I who will make up the shortfall by way of a 3% proposed tax increase. Actually, to be fair (although I think we are splitting hairs) more specifically, a tax increase of 2% is suggested with an additional levy of 1%. You say toe-may-toe, I say tah-mah-toe. One suspects we're supposed to be grateful the increase isn't higher.

Speaking of not paying their fair share, let's not forget the aggregate industry. While an aggregate levy is in place, and this year it's being transferred to offset expenditures, is it enough? Is the aggregate levy even remotely close to the amount required to ensure that the entire Caledon transportation network is in a good state of repair, including roads, bridges and culverts? Considering the havoc wreaked by heavily loaded trucks on Caledon roads, and that some estimates put the amount received from aggregate in 2024 at just \$400,000, that's not enough to even begin to address the physical damage (never mind the carnage) caused by the constant flow of aggregate heavy truck traffic.

Of particular concern to many, including both Councillors and residents alike, is the fact that library funding is not yet included in the budget. Libraries derive their principal source of funding from their local municipality (from development charges, for example) and historically, the library budget is included as part of the town's budget. Is the exclusion an attempt by the town to artificially keep the proposed tax increase low during the budget approval process, only to see an increase become necessary at some later date? The budget document itself, available online through the Town of Caledon's website would seem to suggest that is the case, wherein it states: "The Town provides funding to the (library) board via additional tax levy to residents for both operating and capital expenditures, and therefore must approve the library's budget. The library budget is presented to Council separately, for approval."

In communications received from at least one Councillor, we understand that the library is facing challenges, including wage increases as a result of pay equity initiatives that have not been factored into the town's budget. Another Councillor planned to present an amendment to the town's budget on December 10, to urgently correct the fact that additionally, the proposed budget does

not include any funding for the library's Collections & Materials Capital Project, meaning the library would be unable to purchase any new books in 2025.?

The volunteer group, Friends of the Caledon Public Library, are 'deeply concerned about the potential consequences this would have on the library's services' and I have to say, I am too.

The important role that libraries play in any community, particularly one as large, rural and underserved by internet access such as ours cannot be overstated. They are not just a place for books, (for which they need funds to stay current with new reading materials) but also community hubs that help to address social isolation, and provide access to tools, resources, education and technology for people who might not otherwise have it. They are a place for people to gather, seniors to socialize, persons experiencing homelessness or crisis to come in from the cold and in turn be directed toward additional resources. They are a place for those learning English as a second language to hone their skills. More recently, libraries are also makerspace hubs introducing children, youth and adults to new and innovative equipment they might never otherwise interact with; such as audio or video recording studios, 3D printing, laser cutting equipment and more.

To have any potential discrepancy around library funding and whether or not it forms part of the town's budget is simply not acceptable.

Finally, as is becoming increasingly understood, the Town of Caledon is facing a road safety crisis. A series of town halls across the community, the formation of the Caledon Community Road Safety Advocacy Group and the continued efforts of various community groups throughout our villages and hamlets to advocate for safer roads, less truck traffic and improved traffic calming measures all speak to the urgent need for reform. The town, in fact, recognized that we were in crisis by recently declaring, unanimously, a road safety emergency. At the time and in this space, I called this an important first step to 'direct more resources' toward the fight against illegal trucking and improving road safety. However, as one Councillor noted via email, 'it appears the Mayor's budget has no money for the road safety emergency' so I guess my initial kudos was ill-timed and misplaced. This and similar issues might have been deemed important to the Caledon residents who provided feedback on the budget and/or to those who are tackling safety issues head on as a volunteer group, but clearly they are not as important to those responsible for the budget.

Sure, there's a budget, but there's a lot of missing pieces. I hope that's not going to cost us all in the long run.