

Council does last-minute cutting to lower tax hike

By Bill Rea

It wasn't a lot of cutting, but every little bit helps.

Caledon council Tuesday night jettisoned some more of its spending plans before passing a budget that calls for a 4.281 per cent increase in the town's share of the property taxes to be collected in 2016. Combined with the impacts of the budget passed by Peel Region last month and the assumption that the education portion of taxes is not going to increase, Treasurer Peggy Tollett said the overall tax bill for Caledon residents will be going up by 1.97 per cent. That will mean an additional \$88.20 this year for the average Caledon home assessed at \$519,000.

'This has been a very long budget process.' Councillor Annette Groves observed as the final numbers were being crunched by staff. Council entered Tuesday's meeting looking at an overall increase of 2.08 per cent, which would have added \$93.12 to the average tax bill.

The budget includes a broadband levy that is expected to bring in \$300,000 annually toward the goals of bringing high-speed internet to all the homes in town. The plan is currently operating on a South Western Integrated Fibre Technology (SWIFT) model. In partnership with more than 15 municipalities, SWIFT's objective is to implement a fibre-optic based network throughout Southwestern Ontario that would be owned and operated by the private sector. The infrastructure will be open to all Internet Service Providers to deliver their service.

There are also assumptions that the federal and provincial governments will contribute to this.

Chief Financial Officer Fuwing Wong told Councillor Jennifer Innis the funds from the broadband levy will be set aside, at least until something is revealed in the upcoming federal budget. If the feds and Queen's park don't come up with money, he said they will look for some alternative to SWIFT.

Councillor Doug Beffort commented there are 'varying degrees of concern' when it comes to SWIFT. He said there are some pockets in the community that are very close to places with high-speed internet, and he said it should be possible to connect these people without too much trouble.

Wong told him SWIFT works with carriers, adding the Town wouldn't become a service provider.

He also told Councillor Rob Mezzapelli it should be possible to add an insert into the tax bills, explaining the implications of the broadband levy.

Mayor Allan Thompson said he was glad to see a 'lively discussion' on this, but added many residents have indicated they need help on this.

'We know we have an issue here that we need to deal with,' he added.

The expenditures that were cut Tuesday included \$92,800 that had been set aside for a human resources associate, and a little more than \$90,000 for a law clerk.

There was another attempt to get a \$255,000 expenditure for asphalt spreader/roller/crack sealer tossed, but it was defeated when it came up for a vote. A similar unsuccessful effort had been made last week.

Councillor Nick deBoer, who had called for dropping the item last week, stuck to his position, calling it the responsible thing to do. But Mezzapelli observed the matter had already been debated, adding the information he had seen indicated the expenditure would be a benefit.

'I don't think we should cut corners here,' Councillor Gord McClure added.

Public Works Director David Loveridge commented there's a large backlog of cracks in roads that need to be sealed, adding it's better if these jobs are handled in-house.

Councillor Barb Shaughnessy added there's a benefit to have the machinery available when needed.

'I actually see the business case for this,' she commented.

As well, Mezzapelli made an unsuccessful attempt to add a \$52,000 expenditure to replace fitness equipment at the Caledon Centre for Recreation and Wellness in Bolton.

He had tried to get it in last week, and commented that Parks and Recreation Director Laura Johnston had told him this was high on her list of priorities.

But Shaughnessy had concerns, pointing out private fitness clubs keep back funds to handle equipment replacement, and the Town should do the same.

Groves agreed, commenting there seemed to be no urgent need for this, adding a business plan should be prepared to consider it.

'We're sort of flying by the seat of our pants right now,' she commented.

Councillor Johanna Downey was able to get an item included at the last minute for \$20,000 in spending for changeroom fixture and floor repairs at the pool at Mayfield Recreation Complex.

Concerns had been expressed as to whether that would be enough money to do the work, but Shaughnessy said she had been over it with staff and supported the addition.

Mezzapelli said it would add less than a dollar to the average tax bill.

"I'm absolutely willing to support this," he said.

"It's projects like this that we should be doing," deBoer added.

Groves said she would have liked to have seen a lower tax increase, on the order of 3.5 per cent to the Town's share.

"It's a tough budget," she remarked, adding it contains a number of projects that need to be done, and it wouldn't be realistic to do more cutting.

"I think it's realistic," Beffort remarked.