

Council gets first look at proposed 2016 budget

By Bill Rea

How does a 3.8 per cent property tax increase sound?

Caledon councillors received their first formal look at Town staff's 2016 budget proposals and the current figures are pointing to a 3.8 per cent hike in the overall tax bill.

The figures that staff presented Tuesday would see the Town's portion of the tax bill increase by 5.8 per cent. As the lower-tier municipality, Caledon is responsible to collecting taxes for education, as well as for Peel Region. Councillors were reminded by staff Tuesday that the Town kept 37 per cent of the taxes it collected in 2015, while 32 per cent went to the Region and the remaining 31 per cent went toward education.

Treasurer Peggy Tollett said staff had estimated the Regional budget will be up about two per cent for 2016, and that will equate to a 0.7 per cent hike to the taxes Caledon residents pay. She added the figures are based on an assumption that the educational portion of property taxes will stay the same.

As well, there are proposals for a storm water management plan, as well as a levy to facilitate bringing broadband internet to town. Tollett told councillors work on the budget so far has been a 'collaborative effort' involving all departments.

Tuesday's session was the first of several meetings at which the budget will be discussed. The next will be a public open house and special council meeting planned for Dec. 1, starting at 7 p.m. The current plan calls for approval of the budget Jan. 19.

The Town owns almost \$542 million in assets, and many of those are showing depreciation. Efforts are being made to create a tax-supported fund to cover that.

Director of Corporate Services Fuwing Wong pointed out there are a number of pressures governing the 2016 budget, including inflation, cost of living adjustments and negotiated wage settlements for staff and growth in the municipality. That growth means bringing in more equipment to deal with it and maintain service levels. It also requires adding facilities, and they have to be maintained.

These demands are offset by assessment growth, enabling the Town to collect more taxes. But Tollett pointed out it takes as much as three years between the completion of a house and the time that's reflected on the assessment rolls, but the associated infrastructure like roads have to be maintained.

Last year's budget was for \$75.7 million.

Tollett said there are unavoidable changes already built into the 2016 budget, such as the payment of debts resulting from such things as the enhanced roads program and the Caledon Equestrian Park. They amount to \$754,000. On the other hand, there were some one-time costs in last year's budget that have been removed, resulting in savings of about \$369,000. The budget also calls for increased expenditures, although there are also service delivery efficiencies that have been found, and Tollett said they are looking for more.

'I'm still trying to squeeze departments out for efficiencies,' she commented.

Those expenses come to a little more than \$1.64 million, but are offset by slightly in excess of \$701,000 in added revenues.

As well, there are proposed increases to meet various unmet needs.

The current budget proposals call for a little more than \$14.5 million, with the bulk of that (about 55 per cent) going to public works.

There was talk about infrastructure spending that had been promised by the Liberals during the recent federal election. But Councillor Doug Beffort said he's heard Prime Minister Justin Trudeau refer to a 'bank of infrastructure.'

'It looks like loans,' he said.

Councillor Gord McClure didn't like what he was seeing.

'I think everybody looks at the bottom like,' he said, adding people will wonder why the taxes are so high and what's being done to reduce them. 'This is our job. I think we should rip all of this up and go through it again. This is too much.'

Mayor Allan Thompson said staff had presented a 'reality check' on what the Town has to face.

Addressing McClure, he said 'if we take everything out of Mayfield West this year, we can make it work.'

Councillor Barb Shaughnessy said she would like to see comparisons with what other municipalities will be charging. She knows she'll be asked about that.

Thompson later said the proposed increases are high, but added 'we're at a cross roads.'

They include dealing with growth and closing the gap in the capital funding to maintain infrastructure.

'I do know we're not alone,' he said. 'All the municipalities have these challenges.'

He was also pleased to see the provisions for the storm water management plans and the broadband internet.

?Is this really a tax increase, or is it an investment for the future?? he asked. ?This is what it's going to cost us to invest in our community.?