

Councillors pleased with budget passed for Peel

By Bill Rea

Peel Regional councillors took little time last Thursday passing a budget for 2014.

The combined operating and capital budgets came to \$3.3 billion, which recommends an overall net tax increase of 1.5 per cent, which was less than Regional council's target of 1.8 per cent.

Caledon council passed a budget for the Town earlier this month, calling for a 4.98 per cent increase to the Town's portion of the property tax bill (amounting to roughly 35 per cent). At the time, Town staff had been working on the assumption there would be a 1.6 per cent increase in the Regional share (which took up about 33 per cent of the tax bill last year) while the Education component was not expected to change.

The figures provided by Town staff at that time indicated a blended overall property tax increase of 2.5 per cent.

Peggy Tollett, deputy treasurer for the Town, observed the tax hike from Peel is a little less than had been anticipated. She said the final figures haven't been received from the Region yet, so the exact impact is not known. She did say there's not likely to be a major change from what was already reported.

Utility users will see a seven per cent increase to their water and wastewater bill which translates to an annual increase of \$39 for the average household and \$94 for small businesses, according to the Region. User fees for water and wastewater services are based on consumption. The utility rate covers the cost to treat and deliver fresh drinking water and to treat wastewater from homes and businesses, while also ensuring the infrastructure remains in a state of good repair.

The Region reported that with the 2014 budget increase, Peel's utility rate continues to remain the lowest among GTA municipalities.

Prudent fiscal management of tax dollars is at the core of Regional council's commitment to residents and businesses in Peel, said Regional Chair and CEO Emil Kolb. Council continues to look for better and more cost effective ways to deliver our services, while ensuring our citizens are receiving the right supports when they need it.

Caledon's representatives on Regional council seemed pleased with the result.

Mayor Marolyn Morrison said most of the increase in the Regional tax bill is to pay for policing.

This is a huge budget, she declared. It's a 3.3 billion budget.

Caledon is benefitting from the Region, Morrison added, pointing out the tax increase goes toward paying for needed road work, like the Coleraine Drive component of the Bolton Arterial Road (BAR). These things would not happen if we had zero all the time.

None of us, including me, likes tax increases, she added, stressing the need for more industrial and commercial assessment in Caledon.

The tax from the Region was still rather low, but Councillor Richard Paterak warned that's not going to last much longer.

He said there have been benefits over the last couple of years with the Province uploading various responsibilities, but uploading is going to end soon.

We're going to have to get used to slightly higher budgets, he said.

Paterak said he was pleased the Region did such a good job holding the line on taxes as tight as it did. I think we're steady as she goes, he commented.

Councillor Richard Whitehead, who is also the chair of the management committee of Regional council, called it a responsible budget, adding it's the uploading to the province that has given the lower-tier municipalities like Caledon the ability to add to their budgets to address things like infrastructure needs. He added the Province taking on increased education costs helps in that regard too.

I think staff did a bang-up job this year, he said. They looked in all the cupboards.

Councillor Allan Thompson called it a fair budget.

He said a big concern for him is borrowing against expected development charges. I think we still have to look at delaying some projects.

Councillor Patti Foley said it's been a year of significant challenges for the Region, especially in terms of demand for service, and she thinks the budget reflected that.

Staff delivered a budget that not only allowed us to maintain service levels, but to increase them, Foley said. It was a reasonable increase.

The Region's operating budget of \$2 billion includes spending on services such as garbage collection, police and paramedics,

long-term care homes and community support services for seniors, affordable housing, accessible transportation and roads, water and wastewater, child care subsidies and supports for children with special needs, public health initiatives, financial and employment assistance (Ontario Works), conservation, community investment initiatives and Peel Art Gallery, Museum and Archives (PAMA). The capital budget of \$1.3 billion provides the resources to acquire, improve or maintain major capital assets such as Regional road networks, waste management initiatives, water and wastewater treatment facilities and transmission mains, as well as the buildings and infrastructure to operate Regional services for the wider community.

?Recognizing that complex pressures were impacting our ability to provide existing services at current tax levels, council sought to minimize the burden of tax, so that any potential increases remain affordable,? Whitehead said. ?The 2014 budget allows us to meet operational demands and preserve capital assets so that we do not compromise the integrity of the quality of services provided at the Regional level.?