

Editorial ? Still early days in the budget process

Caledon councillors, and through them the members of the public, got their first good look at what Town staff has in mind for the 2016 budget last week.

The latest proposals (and it must be stressed they are just proposals at this stage) call for an increase of about 5.8 per cent in the Town's share of the municipal property tax bill. We also have to keep in mind that the Town has to collect property taxes for itself, as well as Peel Region and the local school boards. The Town's share last year amounted to about 37 per cent of the total municipal tax bill. The estimate, at this stage, for the combined, overall increase is 3.8 per cent.

There are many who might be inclined to protest that, charging it's too high. That could well be the case.

But like we said, this is still early days. Nothing has been decided yet.

We are all taxpayers, whether we read about what goes on at council meetings, whether we write about them or whether we take no notice at all (at least until the tax bill comes in the mail). Even the mayor and councillors themselves are taxpayers. If anyone has a vested interest in keeping taxes as low as possible, it's these nine people.

It's important to point out that council has had very little time to reflect on the budget information presented last week, let alone come to any decisions. There are several sessions still planned for them to deliberate and debate the proposals, as well as crunch the numbers.

Budgets often start this way, with staff presenting a whole bunch of attractive items, and including details on what it will all cost. From that starting point, councillors start working on what is really wanted, and what is really needed.

The fact is they have barely started on that part of the process.

But there are also certain realities that we all have to face.

The main one is we depend on certain facilities and services in Caledon, and we expect the Town to provide some of them. We expect municipal facilities like arenas and community centres to be there and to function well. We expect roads that can get us from places to place, and that are in good enough shape that they won't rip our tires to shreds. We expect a fire service that will come running if needed.

We also expect a certain amount of service from Peel Region and the local school boards.

None of these things come cheap.

Not only do we expect those services to be there, we also have to understand that equipment is needed to provide them, and that equipment needs to be maintained, and sometimes replaced.

And that doesn't come cheap either.

All of us would like to see taxes as low as possible, and indeed, we would argue that's an important item on the list of responsibilities for the mayor and council.

We would submit it would be easy for council to hold the line on taxes, that's assuming the residents are prepared to make do with less, and not have important pieces of infrastructure maintained and fall into disrepair.

Staff's presentations last week included details of a Storm Water Management Master Plan, as well as ideas for having Caledon served by high-speed internet.

Considering some of the severe storms that have been experienced in the Greater Toronto Area over the last couple of years, an argument could be quickly made that a management plan is needed. There were homes in Etobicoke that were flooded out in July 2013, and it could happen again.

As for the internet, we live in an age in which people are beginning to rely on their ability to get on line almost as much as they depend on their telephones. And students need access to the internet to do their homework.

Both programs are lofty, and will probably have to be addressed eventually.

Is this the time? Will there ever be a better time?

Just saying "No" to the idea of tax increases is not going to be a benefit, at least not in the long-run. Such short thinking was tried in Caledon in the early 1990s, when enough people were suckered into believing that everything would be hunky-dorey if taxes were frozen. Things didn't quite work out as expected.

We are certainly not endorsing the idea of the tax hikes that have been mentioned, at least not yet. There is still a lot more thought and discussion that needs to take place before that happens.

And all of you taxpayers have the right, if not obligation, to put forth your input.

The Town will be hosting a public open house and special council meeting this coming Tuesday (Dec. 1), starting at 7 p.m. at Town Hall in Caledon East.

Have you a problem with the tax increases that have been proposed? That will be a great opportunity to make your feelings known, and maybe have some influence in what the final budget might look like.
Don't say you weren't consulted.