

Fire services, roads and bylaw enforcement top residents' concerns in Budget review]

By Zachary Roman

Caledon Council has begun considering the Town's 2023 budget.

On January 10, municipal staff presented their proposed 2023 budget for Caledon to Council at its General Committee meeting.

As previously reported in the Citizen, the proposed budget was made available for the public to view on January 4, and in it staff proposed a property tax increase of 3.68 per cent for Caledon residents.

Staff presenting to Council included Carey Herd, Chief Administrative Officer; Myuran Palasandiran, Chief Financial Officer; Hillary Bryers, Acting Treasurer; Dave Forfar, Fire Chief; Heather Savage, Director of Community Services; Catherine McLean, Director of Customer Service and Communications; Colleen Lipp, Chief Librarian of the Caledon Public Library; Andrew Pearce, Director of Engineering Services; and Brian Baird, Director of Operations.

Herd spoke first, and said that after two years of focusing mainly on maintaining services throughout the pandemic, Town staff are excited to hear from a new term of Council on its collective priorities. She said in order for Caledon to plan Caledon and accommodate coming growth, more staff will need to be hired, including in the Town's internal departments.

"People living and working in Caledon expect and deserve the best services that we can provide," said Herd. "When preparing the budget, we considered the many pressures facing the Town—costs have gone up, insurance premiums have increased—the senior leadership team and I had many, many, many long conversations and debates about the best way to approach our budget."

Caledon's budget is divided into two sections, operating and capital. The operating budget includes things like financial policies, proposed changes in service levels, and operating budget changes by department.

The capital budget contains information on the Town's capital projects and how they are proposed to be funded.

The Town will see \$2,253,824 in assessment growth in 2023, which comes mainly from taxes levied on new homes and businesses. This revenue will be split between the Town's operating and capital budgets.

After taking into account assessment growth, the proposed net increase of Caledon's overall budget for 2023 is \$3,110,452. This number is the reason for the 3.68 per cent property tax increase.

The budget proposed by staff does not yet show the impacts of Bill 23, and staff are working to have an updated document with Bill 23 factored in as soon as possible.

A survey of Caledon residents on the proposed 2023 Caledon budget closed on January 3.

Palasandiran said approximately 200 people took the survey, and when asked what Town services were most important to them, these three were chosen: fire and emergency services, infrastructure improvements on roads, and bylaw enforcement.

He noted while 200 people is not enough for a statistical representation of the Town, the answers did provide insight.

An online question and answer portal about the budget is currently open on the Town's civic engagement website, haveyoursaycaledon.ca. This question-and-answer portal will be open until February 20. Upon its closure, the Palasandiran said the questions and answers will be consolidated and presented to Council.

Forfar presented on behalf of Caledon Fire and Emergency Services, noting in 2022 over 3,300 emergency incidents were responded

to, a 4.5 per cent increase from 2021. He explained on January 1, 2022, new provincial standards for firefighter training were introduced.

Caledon Fire will ensure firefighters receive the appropriate training and Forfar said money will need to be allotted for this training in 2023.

Also in 2023, Caledon Fire will undertake the creation of a 10-year plan for testing and replacement of firefighting personal protective equipment, firefighting equipment, and more to ensure it meets regulatory standards.

Another goal for 2023 is the creation of a volunteer firefighter retention plan, as Forfar said it's an ongoing battle to recruit and retain volunteer firefighters, who are so important to the Town.

Caledon Fire will look to add incentives for volunteer firefighters to stay on for years to come, recognizing firefighters' experience.

Savage spoke of her department's desire to improve and invest in existing parks in Caledon, as they are more important and more well-used than ever. There are plans for new and renovated off-leash dog parks in Southfields Village and Bolton, as well as a recommendation for a skatepark in Southfields.

The Community Services Department is also preparing for the opening of the expanded Caledon East Community Complex and Humber River Centre in Bolton.

McLean said the success of the Downtown Bolton Revitalization Plan will be used as the model for a Town-wide revitalization plan for all villages.

In the 2023 budget, McLean's department will be asking for the resources to implement this plan. McLean said funds will also be requested for the appropriate staff to further diversity, equity, and inclusion in Caledon.

Colleen Lipp, Chief Librarian of the Caledon Public Library, said the Library's 2023 budget asks are about responding to community needs, such as by meeting increased service demands in Southfields Village with additional staff.

?The community's use of this new branch since its opening in September 2020 has far exceeded our greatest expectations,? said Lipp. ?Staff are stretched beyond the point where they can consistently meet resident needs.?

Pearce and Baird were the last to present, and they said staff recommend the Town invest \$37 million for road maintenance and improvement in 2023.

Council will deliberate on the budget at a February 14 General Committee meeting, before undertaking final considerations and a vote on the budget on February 28.

To view the 2023 budget and the entire presentation from Town staff, those interested can visit caledon.ca.