

Over 30 motions discussed at meeting on Caledon's proposed 2024 budget

New tax increase of 3.85 per cent result of lengthy Council meeting

By ZACHARY ROMAN

A recent Council budget meeting lasted nearly six hours.

On February 14, Caledon Council gathered for a General Committee meeting to discuss the Town of Caledon's proposed 2024 budget.

Councillors requested various changes to the budget at the meeting, by way of 32 motions to add or remove funding for various budget items.

The budget presented last Wednesday, before changes, proposed a 3.47 per cent property tax increase for residents. Adding the Region of Peel's 2.23 per cent property tax increase to that, Caledon residents could expect a total increase of 5.7 per cent.

For an average Caledon homeowner (residential property worth \$670,000), this amounts to a \$321.60 tax increase.

Caledon's Chief Financial Officer Robert Cummings said at the meeting that the budget is a responsible one with a modest tax impact that ensures the continued delivery of services across Caledon.

He noted a one-time draw of \$1.6 million from the Town's tax-funded Operating Contingency reserve to reduce the impact of 2024 operating budget increases on the taxpayer.

Caledon will be seeing nearly \$3.5 million in tax revenue from new homes and businesses in 2024. This revenue is called assessment growth. The Town usually splits this evenly between the operating and capital sides of its budget, but this year's proposed budget has it all going to operating.

The General Committee meeting began with Councillors moving the main motion, which was Town of Caledon staff's recommendation to approve the proposed 2024 budget. The main motion was voted on at the end of the meeting, with Councillors' 32 amending motions discussed and voted on (or withdrawn) in between.

After the main motion was moved, Regional Councillor Christina Early asked if any Councillors would like to withdraw any of their motions.

Regional Councillor Mario Russo withdrew his motion requesting funding for maintenance of high-traffic urban boulevards in Caledon as it was nearly identical to a motion put forward by Ward 2 Councillor Dave Sheen.

Ward 6 Councilor Cosimo Napoli withdrew his motion requesting that Caledon's aquatic leadership program be added to the 2024 budget, as it is already in the budget but was not viewable in the budget document due to a clerical error. Caledon's aquatic leadership program offers free leadership courses so that the cost of becoming a lifeguard or swim instructor is not prohibitive. This program has seen success in getting more lifeguards and swim instructors working for Caledon.

Russo withdrew a motion requesting funding for a memorial program subsidy, also for the reason that it's already in the budget but was not viewable due to a clerical error. The subsidy provides 50 per cent of the cost to residents looking to buy an aluminum memorial bench to honour someone in Caledon, with a maximum of 10 benches subsidized per year.

Ward 3 Councillor Doug Maskell's motion to remove the \$1.6 million one-time draw from Caledon's tax-funded operating

contingency reserve was then discussed.

Maskell said he wanted to bring the motion forward first as much would change throughout budget discussions, meaning Town staff may need to draw a different amount, if any, from the reserve in order to keep the tax increase at 3.47 per cent, if Council agreed that was still the goal.

The motion passed, with Ward 4 Councillor Nick de Boer and Ward 1 Councillor Lynn Kiernan in opposition.

Caledon's tax-funded operating contingency reserve was sitting at about \$2.6 million going into the 2024 budget process, while its tax-funded capital contingency reserve was sitting at about \$5.4 million. These reserves are built over time by taxpayers and played a central role in budget discussions this year, with Councillors differing in opinion on use of the reserves.

Sheen's motion requesting that Caledon add new automated speed enforcement cameras to its roster was discussed next. Caledon currently has two and the 2024 budget proposed two more; Sheen proposed an additional two to bring Caledon's total to six by the end of the year.

In his motion, Sheen said the cameras are one of the most effective traffic calming measures and having six cameras would mean Caledon could have one in each of its six wards at all times.

Russo said he was fundamentally in favour of the motion but that it was not practical yet as more data needs to come in from the cameras Caledon already has before more money can be spent on more cameras.

Staff said there's been early findings on the success of Caledon's automated speed enforcement cameras but staff haven't yet had the chance to synthesize data and bring it back to Council.

Maskell agreed with Russo and also said it was early to consider adding more cameras when there's not enough data about the current cameras available. He also raised concerns about Caledon's capacity at this time to manage the number of tickets six cameras would give out.

Ward 5 Councillor Tony Rosa said he's seen firsthand the effectiveness of the cameras but agreed with Russo and Maskell. He said he'd like to see staff analyze data from the cameras sooner than later.

Sheen noted that Caledon can currently process 20,000 tickets per year, which six cameras would almost certainly issue more than. However, he suggested this could be countered by having the cameras operate only during certain hours of the day. He said residents would not know when the cameras are active, and therefore they'd still have their intended effect of deterring bad driving behaviour.

'We're in the business to keep people safe,' said Sheen. 'On behalf of all my residents complaining about speeders? I would rather accelerate the plan.'

Sheen's motion was ultimately defeated, with Councillors de Boer and Kiernan supporting it.

Next up was a motion from Maskell. He motioned to remove a \$50,000 Caledon Public Library (CPL) strategic plan project. Maskell said as the CPL recently presented its comprehensive growth plan to Council, perhaps the strategic plan project could be moved to 2025, as it's a one-time expense, and the CPL could take 2024 to see how the growth plan is being implemented.

He said he'd be more than welcome to see the project come back in 2025 as he's an avid supporter of the library.

Sheen, who is also a CPL Board member, said the strategic approach the CPL takes to everything it does is truly impressive and that he's never seen an organization that's so organized. He said he's very confident that if the CPL is requesting the strategic plan for 2024, it needs it for 2024.

Kiernan said libraries are very important to Caledon and provide an amazing service, and that if the strategic plan is delayed it will have a ripple effect.

CPL CEO Colleen Lipp phoned into the meeting and said the strategic plan is an essential aspect of the CPL board's governance of library actions.

?What we are looking to do with the assistance of consultants is cater a plan that is specific to the needs of Caledon,? said Lipp. ?The comprehensive growth plan is that long range vision, the strategic plan is the baby steps that allow us to ultimately get there in a manner that is effective and efficient.?

Maskell's motion was passed, with de Boer, Kiernan, Sheen, and Early opposed.

Maskell's next motion, requesting a \$40,000 draw on the Town's fitness equipment replacement reserve to fix amenities, was quickly passed.

Next on the agenda was another motion from Maskell, this time requesting the elimination of an \$80,000 capital project to hire a consultant to review Caledon's Ward boundaries and Council composition.

Maskell said this project was good at the time it was proposed, which was when the Region of Peel was still going to be dissolved. He said in 2024, the project is not needed, but perhaps it could be brought back in 2025 considering the amount of growth coming in Mayfield West.

The motion was passed with unanimous support.

After that, another motion from Maskell was discussed, which requested that Caledon draw \$650,000 from its tax-funded capital contingency reserve to fund a bridge culvert and design program. The proposed budget had the program funded by tax.

Maskell said Caledon should use some of its reserves to reduce the impact on taxpayers this year.

A \$5 million reserve seems like a lot, said de Boer, but he said it isn't when you consider a large emergency cost like fixing a collapsed arena roof, for example. He said drawing from the reserve only pushes a tax increase further down the line.

?You're heading Caledon's residents to a point where they're going to be paying big time in the future,? he said. ?We lost the swimming pool in Caledon Village because we had no money to pay for it? we were one heavy snowfall away from losing Mayfield Pool.?

Cummings said at present he feels Caledon's tax-funded capital contingency reserve is a little bit low.

?I don't think taking [the \$650,000] out for something that was planned to go forward this year would be a prudent move at this point in time,? said Cummings.

Russo said in the post-COVID world Caledon needs to make some concessions and ease the burden on taxpayers. He said as Caledon is entering a growth phase, its reserves will soon be rapidly replenished.

?We are taking somewhat of a balanced approach of ?where do we draw that line? At this point in time I'm comfortable with that line being a little bit more so in favor of the taxpayer as opposed to the reserve fund, because we have gone through a record year of inflation,? said Russo.

Maskell said Caledon's reserves were built by taxpayers and at this difficult financial time they deserve to see benefits.

Kiernan said she's not supportive of drawing on the reserves as Caledon has aging infrastructure that could present unforeseen, expensive problems. She said she respects Cummings' opinion that Caledon should be building its reserves.

Early said while she respects her colleagues for wanting to lower the tax rate to the taxpayer, she doesn't support drawing from reserves because Council has a responsibility to future taxpayers, too.

Maskell's motion was passed with Councillors de Boer, Kiernan, Sheen, and Early opposed.

After receiving clarity from staff on his next motion, which requested the removal of a \$40,000 vehicle purchase, Maskell voted against it alongside the rest of his Councillor colleagues. Staff provided Maskell with more details about why the vehicle was needed, which changed his mind.

Maskell then motioned to use money from Caledon's federal gas tax reserve to assist in a gravel resurfacing project; however, it was determined by staff that this project was ineligible for use of the reserve money.

Maskell's motion was unanimously voted down, but staff said they could look at using the money for an eligible project.

Next on Maskell's list of motions was a request to fund the Bolton bandshell project through payment in lieu of parkland instead of tax funding. The bandshell is proposed in Dick's Dam Park (mistakenly written as R.J.A. Potts Memorial Park in the budget document) and sports a price tag of \$450,000.

Cummings said while cash-in-lieu of parkland is typically used to acquire land for new parks, it can also be used to redevelop parks. After de Boer suggested payment in lieu of parkland funding should be saved, Cummings said staff could find another funding source than payment in lieu of parkland or tax levy for the bandshell.

Maskell's motion was amended to reflect this change in funding source and was then unanimously supported.

Maskell's next motion asked for \$670,000 in funding for playground improvements to come from the tax-funded capital contingency reserve instead of tax funding. As with his previous motions, the goal was to reduce impact on the taxpayer this year by drawing from the reserve.

Again, de Boer disagreed with Maskell because of his belief in not drawing from that reserve. He said he was 'flabbergasted' with the request. Sheen also said he did not approve of the request as it would bring the reserve down to a level that's uncomfortable for him.

Early said 'flabbergasted' is the right word.

'We have a ten-year capital plan. We have to stop what's going on here, trying to dip into the reserve for every service item that we're doing in the Town of Caledon,' said Early. 'In three, four, or five years you're going to be in a lot of trouble here.'

Maskell's motion was passed with Councillors de Boer, Kiernan, Early, and Sheen opposed.

Maskell's next motion was to fund an increase in CPL staff service levels at a cost of \$30,555 through tax. The motion was unanimously supported and the CPL will be able to promote 11 public service assistants to the role of public service coordinators, providing flexibility in staffing and assisting in preventing branch closures.

Following that motion, Maskell motioned to add a contract Heritage Planner using money from Caledon's tax-funded operating contingency reserve in the amount of \$66,355. He said the Province's Bill 23 requires automatic removal of all listed, non-designated heritage properties from municipalities' heritage registers by January 1, 2025. He said this means Caledon needs to designate as

many properties that merit designation by this deadline, and having an extra staff person would help.

?If we don't move those buildings from one registry to the other, we do know that they will be delisted and we can't bring them back for five years,? said Maskell.

Staff said Bill 23 has presented challenges for maintaining heritage resources and there there are currently 62 properties in Caledon that have ?significant heritage value? and are under development pressure.

Cummings said there's more leeway with the operating reserve than capital reserve so it's not out of line to use the operating reserve for an item like a one-year contract.

Maskell's motion was passed, and his next motion, to add \$100,000 in funding for a Caledon East Dog Park Improvement Plan (through payment in lieu of parkland or tax) was tabled.

He said at present the dog park is a fenced-off grass area with no amenities and he'd like to see it finished.

After the motion was amended to make the funding source development charges, it was passed with Councillors Kiernan and Sheen in opposition.

Russo was the mover of the next motion, requesting \$50,000 in tax funding for Town-wide traffic calming measures such as signage, line markings and speed bumps. He said traffic is a constant concern and that \$50,000 is a reasonable price tag.

de Boer motioned to amend the matter and have \$100,000 be dedicated to traffic calming measures because it's such a big issue in Caledon.

The amendment to the motion was passed, as was the motion itself.

Russo had another motion on the board next, to add \$50,000 in tax funding to create an operational budget to support the delivery of programming at the new Humber River Centre (HRC) in Bolton.

He said the HRC is a great asset to the community and an operating budget is necessary to use it properly. The motion was passed unanimously.

Next, Rosa motioned to add \$500,000 in funding from the tax-funded capital contingency reserve to expedite construction of an elevator in the Di Gregorio Bocce Centre in Bolton. Rosa said it's an accessibility issue and that many users of the facility can't currently access its second floor.

Mayor Annette Groves said installing the elevator needs to be done to support those who use the building.

Kiernan suggested amending the motion as she felt the project was very important but its funding shouldn't come from reserves. She suggested using tax funding. Her amendment was defeated, and Rosa's motion was passed as written.

Kiernan, Sheen, de Boer and Early opposed the motion, noting they only did so because of the funding source.

Maskell then motioned to remove Councillors' two per cent cost of living pay increase in 2024. This motion was defeated, with only Maskell voting in favour of it.

The meeting continued with discussion of more motions from Maskell before Napoli brought forward a motion requesting the addition of parks maintenance staff to maintain the Caledon Trailway, through \$60,000 in tax funding.

Staff said the additional staff members would allow for more proactive trail maintenance. Napoli's motion was supported unanimously.

Napoli then made a motion requesting the addition of additional staff through \$110,000 in tax funding to tackle invasive species in Caledon. It was also passed unanimously.

Napoli's next two motions also focused on adding additional staff ? parks staff and summer students ? through tax funding and were also supported unanimously.

Sheen then put forward his motion regarding maintenance of high-traffic urban boulevards in the amount of \$55,000 annually from tax funding. He said demand for maintenance of the boulevards is rising and that Caledon should take pride in the look and feel of its community. The motion was supported unanimously.

Sheen's next motion asked for a dedicated Economic Development Officer to work at the HRC.

He said the HRC is a great place for entrepreneurs and small businesses and that Caledon should properly invest in its operation in order to make the best use of it. The ask requires \$120,000 of tax funding and was supported unanimously.

Sheen then motioned to add \$500,000 from tax funding towards contract services to manage development applications, but the motion was defeated.

Kiernan then made a motion to phase in benefits for permanent part-time CPL staff in the amount of \$30,000 annually from tax funding. It was supported unanimously.

A motion from Groves was next, to add \$50,000 from tax funding to go towards celebrating Caledon's 50th anniversary.

?This a milestone,? said Groves.

The motion was supported unanimously.

The last motion at the meeting was from Kiernan, who requested \$60,000 from the 2024 tax levy to replace the bleachers at the Alton Community Diamond. This too was supported unanimously.

After all of Council's motions, it was determined Caledon's tax increase would be 3.85 per cent, barring any draw from the tax-funded operating contingency reserve. It was determined only \$715,000, rather than \$1.6 million, would be needed to bring the rate back to the originally proposed 3.47 per cent.

Cummings said 3.85 per cent is still a very reasonable number, and Maskell agreed saying it would be good for Council to avoid drawing on the operating contingency reserve.

The main motion of the meeting, staff's recommendation to approve the proposed 2024 budget and bring it to a February 20 Special Council meeting for final approval, was then voted on with the new tax increase of 3.85 per cent.

The motion was passed with Councillors de Boer and Sheen in opposition. The budget was brought forward for final approval at a Special Council meeting on February 20.