

Proposed tax hike drops, thanks to Region

By Bill Rea

Peel Region's recently-passed budget meant some good news for Caledon taxpayers; namely a lower than had been anticipated tax increase.

Regional council approved the 2016 budget Dec. 3, calling for \$2.1 billion in operating expenditures and the spending of about \$500 million on capital projects.

The budget includes a property tax increase of 0.8 per cent and a utility rate increase of nine per cent. Peel utility rates are still the lowest in the Greater Toronto Area.

Town Treasurer Peggy Tollett told Caledon councillors Tuesday that will add 0.4 per cent to the local municipal tax bill, down from the 0.7 per cent that had been anticipated a month ago.

The Town is currently looking at increasing its share of the property tax bill by 5.8 per cent.

Caledon is responsible to collecting taxes for education, as well as the Region. Councillors were reminded by staff at the start of the budget process 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.

The new figures from the Region means Caledon taxpayers are currently looking at an overall tax hike of 3.3 per cent, with would amount to an extra \$146 being added to the tax bill for the average property assessed at \$519,000. That \$146 includes a levy of \$18 to bring in the proposed stormwater management plan, and another levy of \$11 to have broadband internet access throughout Caledon.

Tollett said those figures are pending any alterations to the proposed Town budget that council might make.

The swift passage of the Region's budget came as a surprise to some, including Mayor Allan Thompson.

"I'm surprised it went through as quick as it did," he said.

"It was a good budget," he added, pointing out it was low enough to leave more monetary room for the lower-tier municipalities, resulting in the proposed 3.3 per cent blended increase.

Councillor Johanna Downey thought the tax increase from the Region was reasonable.

"I have confidence in the Town's finance department," she said. "I have confidence in the Regional financial staff."

"It's a fiscally-responsible budget," commented Councillor Annette Groves, "and we came in at under two per cent."

Benefits for Caledon include funding for the Bolton Transportation Master Plan and the Bolton Residential Expansion study (BRES).

"We've got some very important things for Caledon in the budget," Groves added.

Councillor Jennifer Innis was also impressed with the job Regional staff did.

"I think the Region does a really good job preparing its budgets," she said. "I really didn't have any concerns with the budget this time around."

She was also satisfied with the Regional tax hike.

"It's not the zero increase we've been used to, but it's fair."

Councillor Barb Shaughnessy was another who was surprised at how quickly the budget went through.

"I guess they figured 'Why deliberate any longer?'" she said.

Shaughnessy said she was pleased the budget for Caledon OPP passed, including provisions for a police facility at the community hall in Belfountain.

"That was wonderful," she said, also pointing out Credit Valley Conservation is getting funding for the work on the Belfountain Complex.

"I think it was a fair budget, and I think people worked hard to bring it in line with expectations," she added.

"The fundamental objective of the Region is to ensure that the residents of Peel receive the services they need in a well-managed and cost effective manner," said Regional Chair Frank Dale. "The 2016 Regional budget meets that objective and balances the continued delivery of important services with the need for immediate to long-term financial investments."

Through its recent strategic planning process, the Region heard from the community and stakeholders about the future needs of Peel and developed Term of Council Priorities based on this feedback. This budget is aligned with the Region's Strategic Plan that was recently endorsed by council and allows enough flexibility to adapt resources appropriately and advance Peel towards its new 20-year vision and Term of Council Priorities.

Regional staff reported the budget will ensure that the necessary resources are in place to support existing service levels and growing

service demands. They include 38,000 more TransHelp trips; the operation of a new paramedic reporting station and three additional satellite stations; two additional ambulances, operating 24 hours a day seven days a week, to address an increase in 9-1-1 calls; addressing the impact of the Emerald Ash Borer in the Credit Valley Conservation and Toronto and Region Conservation Authority tree canopy