

Residents wonder if councillors need assistants

By Bill Rea

Caledon staff is still proposing an increase of 4.72 per cent in the Town's share of the property tax bill, and that's raising a bit of concern with residents.

About 50 of them were at the public input session of the Town's budget last Wednesday. There were some specific issues raised, but little in the way of outright opposition.

There were a couple of comparisons made to the proposed City of Toronto budget, which calls for a tax hike of a little more than two per cent. There were also some comments of plans to hire two support people for council.

But there was very little in the way of anger expressed after the staff presentation, which was almost identical to the one given to council the week before.

Mayor Allan Thompson told the audience nothing has been finalized yet.

"No decision has been made on the proposed budget," he declared.

Chief Financial Officer Fuwing Wong stressed last week's session was for public input.

"The budget is about allocating resources," he added.

One man at the meeting observed the Town gets six cents per tonne as an aggregate levy. He argued it should be more like \$2 to \$2.50.

Wong told him former mayor Marolyn Morrison had worked with groups like the top aggregate-producing municipalities, as well as industry representatives to try and get a better share. He added a conference is scheduled for the next month, and it's expected that issue will come up then.

Recreation facilities were on the minds of some of the people at the meeting, including the closed Caledon Central Pool. Wong said when the pool was closed about a year ago, council decided to take the money to be saved from the operating costs and put it into a reserve fund for recreation facilities on the west side of town. He added council voted last month to set up a visioning exercise, resulting in a new recreation master plan.

Assessment growth is expected to be about \$1.35 million for this year. One man said there didn't seem to be any great changes in the projected increase over the next couple of years, wondering why the massive Canadian Tire development in Bolton hadn't caused a big change.

Wong had previously pointed out it takes about three years between when building permits are issued and the Town actually sees taxes coming from a development. It also takes time the Municipal Property Assessment Corporation (MPAC) to actually assess the development. Wong also said those numbers have been factored into the projections, but they have been offset by the freezing of lands around the GTA's West Corridor that runs through town.

He said more assessment is expected from areas like South Simpson Road in Bolton, as well as Tullamore.

The Town is anxious to increase its industrial and commercial tax base, so it's been putting in roads and associated infrastructure to attract businesses, with the plan of charging them for the improvements later.

One man raised the issue of the Toronto budget, pointing out Caledon is looking at twice the rate proposed for the City, and twice the rate of inflation.

"Four point seven two per cent is a hell of a lot just for the Town's operating and capital expenditures," he remarked.

Wong pointed out Toronto is a single-tier municipality while Caledon is at the lower tier with Peel Region at the higher one. The combined increase of the two tiers is currently expected to be about two per cent.

The proposed budget calls for expenditures of \$79,620 for an assistant to council and \$96,430 for a communication coordinator for council.

Treasurer Peggy Tollett had explained the communication coordinator was intended to improve information and dealings with the public.

One woman wondered if these people would be getting offices, pointing out councillors don't even get offices at Town Hall.

Wong said councillors deal with staff, but these positions would be aimed at community engagement and serving the public.

The woman was concerned one councillor might use the assistant for tasks the councillor should be performing.

"It's a shared resource," Wong said.

The woman said she understood people in the community are busy and might have trouble getting the information they need.

"We can't really baby the public too much," she said. "I have a problem with hiring two people."

Thompson pointed out the workload has increased greatly in the 12 years he's been on council, and it was decided they needed help

dealing with it. He added a lot of smaller municipalities with smaller councils have assistants.

He also commented that half the councillors sit at Peel Regional council, and there could be moved soon to reduce Caledon's representation there. They will need supports, as well as people to do research to help fight such a move.

'We've got some big challenges ahead,' Thompson said.

He added they heard complaints during last fall's election campaign, as well as calls for councillors to do a better job and increase access to the public. A person coordinating information could keep track of things councillors should be following up on.

'Residents want their information real quick,' the Mayor observed.

Town CAO Doug Barnes added staff canvassed suburban municipalities around the GTA, and came up with what they thought were appropriate supports for council.

'I think it's a reasonable proposal,' he said. 'It wasn't just pulled out of the air.'

Town departments will be making their budget presentations to council Feb. 2 and 3, with council being scheduled to approve the budget March 3.