

Town budget passes in split vote

By Bill Rea

It took almost six hours, with a number of proposed amendments and amendments to amendments, but Caledon council finally passed its budget for 2015 Tuesday.

The budget, in its final form, calls for a 4.82 per cent increase to the Town's share of the property tax bill, which amounted to about 36 per cent in 2014. The Town is also required to collect the taxes for Peel Region and the local school boards. The Region passed its budget late last month, and the tax levels for education, which are set by the Province, will not likely be known for several weeks. The combination of the Town and Regional budgets mean an overall tax hike of two per cent, Treasurer Peggy Tollett told councillors. That will add \$84.26 to the tax bill for a home assessed at \$480,000.

It looked for a while that councillors would be able to bring in a lower tax increase. But a final adjustment, seemingly at the last minute, saw the prospect of investing in Light Emitting Diode (LED) streetlight replacements, taking advantage of grants, appeal to the majority.

Mayor Allan Thompson voted to accept the two per cent increase, along with Councillors Doug Beffort, Johanna Downey, Nick deBoer and Rob Mezzapelli. Councillors Barb Shaughnessy, Gord McClure, Jennifer Innis and Annette Groves were opposed. Thompson defended the decision regarding the streetlights. "It's a huge investment in our future," he said. "Two per cent is a fair tax overall."

He was also pleased with provisions in the budget to streamline items in the planning process and improve customer service. "We eliminated a lot of red tape here today," he remarked.

Some of the councillors who opposed the budget referred to promises they made in the fall municipal elections.

"I campaigned to not put taxes up too much," McClure said after the meeting, observing the annual tax increases add up. He said he would have been able to support an overall increase of 1.7 per cent, but not two.

Innis was another who remembered promises she made in the election.

"I made a commitment that I would work toward a budget that would be in line with the rate of inflation," she commented, observing the inflation rate is about 1.6 per cent. "I was willing to come up and make it 1.7. That was my compromise."

She was also not pleased that the streetlights matter came up at the end.

"I don't think that's the way they should be presenting budgets," she remarked.

Groves said she had been concerned about too many burdens on taxpayers at a time like this.

"We have a very unstable economy," she commented, pointing out the Province is out of money, there will be a federal election this year and a lot of people are losing their jobs.

"People are having a very difficult time financially to make ends meet," she observed, adding they have to cut back and live within their means.

"All the extras, they can't afford," she said, stating the Town shouldn't be spending on extras either.

Shaughnessy said they worked very hard to get the increase down to 1.7 per cent, and the streetlights came up at the end.

"It sort of blindsided us a bit," she observed. "I hate things that come up at the last minute because it doesn't give us time to vet it out."

But the other councillors were more supportive.

"I felt two per cent was a reasonable tax increase," Mezzapelli said, adding the last minute addition was a good investment.

Beffort called the final increase a "good mediated decision," adding the Town stands to gain from the grants for the lights.

"I think when it comes down to it, we're going to pay now or going to pay later," Downey observed. "You're going to have increases across the board. Everything costs more."

She added staff put a lot of work into the budget, and councillor made compromises.

"It's good," deBoer said. "We accomplished getting a number of projects done that needed to be done."

He added two per cent was in the range that people were expecting.