

Town hears some grumbling about proposed tax hike

By Bill Rea

The Town continues to look at a tax increase of 4.98 per cent in the coming budget, and that's not sitting well with some people. Members of the public were given the chance to have their input last Wednesday, and a couple of the people in the Caledon Council Chambers openly asked why taxes always have to go up.

One man charged his property taxes have gone up about 108 per cent since 2003, while the Consumer Price Index increased by only 20.1 per cent.

While the Town collects all the property taxes paid in Caledon, it only keeps about 35 per cent for its own uses. Town staff reported that in 2013, about 33 per cent went to Peel Region and the remaining 32 per cent went to the two local school Boards.

But the man in the audience stated the Regional portion of his taxes have only gone up about 41.4 per cent since 2003, and the education portion has only gone up about 10 per cent.,

'Where is Rob Ford when we need him?' the man asked. 'These increases are becoming normalized.'

He also cited places like Burlington and Hamilton. He said there hasn't been a tax increase in Burlington in about 10 years, and Hamilton's taxes are up about 10 per cent.

'When is there going to be some concern?' he demanded. 'At some point, when is it going to stop?'

'Somebody actually has to pay for this,' he added.

Mayor Marolyn Morrison pointed out the Region came into a lot of money over the last couple of years through Provincial uploading.

She also pointed out Caledon has the eighth lowest tax rate in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), but there are still many assets belonging to the Town that have to be maintained.

'We're all taxpayers,' she said. 'We certainly listen to you.'

The budget process is continuing, with the individual departments scheduled to make their presentations to Town councillors this coming Monday and Tuesday. Council is expected to approve the budget Dec. 3.

Deputy Treasurer Peggy Tollett gave a brief overview of where taxes go in Caledon at last week's session, commenting the Town is responsible for some 1,500 kilometres of roads, 120 kilometres of sidewalks, 133 major structures, 68 stormwater management ponds, 5,100 streetlights, etc.

She also pointed out Caledon has one of the largest volunteer fire services in Ontario. This year, as of September, the department performed 2,796 emergency responses, with an average response time of 8.17 minutes.

The budget staff has proposed addresses a number of issues, Tollett said, including infrastructure to support the growth in Mayfield West, as well as other infrastructure shortfalls. She added it advances non-residential development that is not impacted by the work on the GTA West Corridor. Currently, about 82 per cent of the tax base in Caledon is residential, and there are ongoing efforts to increase the share covered by industrial and commercial development.

Tollett explained there are unavoidable pressures that are adding expenditures to the budget, including inflation, cost-of-living increases for staff, etc. These pressures are being offset by revenue increases, but the result is about \$800,000 being added to the budget.

Staff has been able to find other deductions through things like service delivery efficiencies, new fees and increases, etc. As well, she said each department was assigned a target to find savings, and that resulted in about \$500,000 being found.

However, roughly \$800,000 has been added to the budget to address urgent unmet needs.

Treasurer Fuwing Wong addressed the tax-funded portion of the capital budget, which was at \$8.1 million for capital infrastructure investment in 2013. Staff is suggesting it be increased to \$10.4 million in 2014.

He pointed out the Town has more than \$500 million in assets, and as they age there will be greater pressures on the tax-funded capital funding for them. He added some of this money will be needed to finance growth-related projects, since they can't be paid for with development charges alone.

Wong said some capital projects have had to be moved into this year's budget, such as replacing the roof at Mayfield Recreation Complex, replacement of breathing apparatus used by the fire department, additional vehicles needed by the Town's fleet, and road reconstruction and rehabilitation. These projects have been offset to an extent by others that are being put off until another year.

Wong some of the capital program will be financed through assessment growth. They are also looking at a tax increase to reach the \$10.4 million figure.

As well, the Town is planning to debenture some of the road work, with the idea being to spend the money now and going into debt,

as opposed to waiting five years and paying a great deal more.

Both Wong and Morrison told the meeting the Town is always looking for ways to save money and do things better.

One man suggested some of the services performed in-house could be out-sourced. Wong agreed, pointing out that's the case with legal services.

?I think staff is always looking,? Morrison added.

She also pointed out the Town used to out-source things like snow plowing and grass cutting. But the bids got to be so high, it was cheaper to do them in-house.

?It seems to go back and forth, depending on what decade you're in,? she commented.

One man charged the constant tax increases aren't sustainable, adding if the Town were a private corporation, it would have gone bankrupt years ago.

Another man in the audience countered there were no tax increases in Caledon for a number of years, and a lot of necessary work to things like roads never got addressed.