

Town taxes up 4.98 per cent ? Council passes 2014 budget for Caledon

By Bill Rea

?The more things change, the more they stay the same.?

That old saying could have applied to Tuesday's deliberations over Caledon's budget for 2014.

In the end, Town councillors went along with the staff recommendation for a 4.98 per cent tax increase for Caledon's portion of the property tax bill. But they also made some adjustments to the capital spending plans, making sure the tax situation was not changed. The result meant there is roughly \$182,700 set aside for tax-supported capital spending, but it still has to be decided what it's going to be spent on. Staff is going to come forward with recommendations on where that money can go, but Mayor Marolyn Morrison cautioned her colleagues not to expect that report before the new year.

The budget approved Tuesday only applies to the Town's share of the property tax bill, which last year only amounted to about 35 per cent. Peel Region got about 33 per cent and the local school boards got the other 32 per cent. Tuesday's decisions means about \$88.08 will be added to the tax bill of a home assessed at \$480,000. Deputy Treasurer Peggy Tollett pointed out that while nothing has yet to be determined by the Region or regarding education, staff was working on the assumption that Peel's tax rate will likely go up by 1.6 per cent, and the education share of the tax bill is not going to change. If that's the case, she said Caledon residents can expect a blended increase of about 2.5 per cent, or a hike of \$109.82 for a home assessed at \$480,000.

Tollett called the staff proposals ?very fiscally responsible,? pointing out the base budget from last year was actually reduced by about \$100,000, owing largely to staff efficiencies. It also addresses deficits in the Town's infrastructure, as well as service needs in growth areas.

?We're trying to make this municipality so it's sustainable in the future,? Morrison remarked.

She also pointed out the vote at council was unanimous (Councillor Gord McClure was absent), meaning there was consensus that the budget is reasonable.

Councillor Richard Whitehead thought the staff recommendations were ?quite responsible.?

He pointed out that looking back about 20 years, there was a period when there were no tax increases, and the Town's infrastructure suffered. The next 10 years saw annual increases averaging about 3.3 per cent, meaning an overall average tax hike over the 20 years of less than two per cent.

He also pointed out the strategy for the last couple of years has been to aim most of the increases toward capital projects by building and spending capital reserves. He said that's been working well.

?All in all, I think it was a very responsible budget,? Councillor Patti Foley commented.

In terms of changes, Councillor Richard Paterak was successful in getting his colleagues to go along with having \$40,000 redirected to the Town's gravel pit rehabilitation master plan. That money will be coming from planned work to look at protocols used in other municipalities to deal with telecommunication and cellular towers.

?It's revenue neutral,? he pointed out, adding the work on the protocol could be put off for a year, while the work on the master plan has been waiting for 12 years with nothing being done.

Councillor Rob Mezzapelli pointed out the number of applications for towers is increasing, and he wondered if that would create problems for the Town. Director of Development Approval and Planning Policy Mary Hall said staff got that project from council. She said the protocol is more than 10-years-old, and she had told council at the time that staff was busy, so outside resources would be needed to do it. They have not yet found anyone to do the job. She also told Mezzapelli the job could be done in-house if staff is increased.

Mezzapelli and Foley were successful in getting \$70,000 worth of projects of their own, suggesting the money come from a plan to have free public Wi-Fi installed at Town Hall and some other municipal facilities. He said they wanted to see \$25,000 used to top up the Library's books and material budget to \$400,000; \$20,000 for lighting at two of four bocce courts in R. J. A. Potts Memorial Park in Bolton; and the other \$25,000 for water-bottle filling stations at the Caledon Centre for Recreation and Wellness, Albion-Bolton Community Centre, Mayfield Recreation Complex and the Caledon Community Complex.

Addressing the bocce courts, Mezzapelli said ?it's a well-used facility.? While he said it might not seem important in the overall picture, he said the work is half done. ?It's about time we completed the project,? he remarked.

?If we don't do it, it won't get done,? he added.

He also observed that \$252,700 had been budgeted for the Wi-Fi. Treasurer Fuwing Wong said the most expensive parts of that are two LAN controllers, running about \$100,000 each. Two are being suggested so there's back-up if one of them fails.

Councillor Nick deBoer suggested scrapping the Wi-Fi expenditure all together, wondering if there is enough demand to justify it.

He agreed it's a convenience, but added there are more pressing projects.

Wong told Councillor Allan Thompson that buying just one controller for the Wi-Fi would mean there's no back-up if the other fails, and it could take about a week to get things running again.

That was a concern for Thompson, who observed some of the Town facilities are no longer competitive because Wi-Fi's not available.

Mezzapelli pointed out if there's only one controller and it fails, things will be no worse than they are now, with no Wi-Fi.

DeBoer got his colleagues to go along with dropping the Wi-Fi spending, suggesting staff report back on how they spend the remaining \$182,700.

Councillor Doug Beffort, who has been a proponent of Wi-Fi, said he's been talking to information technology people about it, and some concerns have been raised. He said he's heard of places with Wi-Fi that are now having liability issues.

Addressing the \$182,700, Whitehead urged his colleagues to let staff report on possible ways to use the money, as opposed to getting ideas through that night.

"I don't think we should get involved in a poker game," he commented.

Mezzapelli wanted to make sure councillors could still offer suggestions on how the money is used.

"You always have that opportunity," Morrison told him.

Paterak was amused that Wi-Fi had lost a lot of its appeal once the real cost came out. "We crumple like a cheap suit," he said.

DeBoer stressed the need to have a complete system. "Let's do this whole thing right once," he said.