

5.09% tax hike on table as budget talks near end

By Brock Weir

Aurora residents could find the municipal portion of their annual property tax bill increased by 5.09% as the Town's 2015 budget talks enter the home stretch.

Councillors met on Monday night to continue whittling down the potential tax increase which started earlier this year as a proposed hike of 4.96%. A significantly higher than anticipated budget request from Central York Fire Services (CYFS), however, quickly increased this to 6.1%, but a number of changes have taken place over recent weeks to bring this closer to the original estimate.

Although one further budget item is up for consideration on March 23 before the final numbers are crunched and approved in April, this 5.09% proposal, when weighted and combined with tax increases from the Region of York, translates into a 3.11% overall increase on residential tax bills, or \$88 more annually for the average Aurora home assessed at \$500,000.

Savings were found at the table through taking a phased-in approach on the requests made by the (CYFS), as well as nominal decreases in several other areas of municipal operations, including budget requests from the Aurora Cultural Centre, the Aurora Public Library, and Aurora Historical Society.

Fire, however, was the largest ticket item.

The Joint Council Committee (JCC), the body comprised of Councillors from Aurora and Newmarket appointed to oversee the operations of the CYFS, were facing an \$8 million budget pressure related to a revised Fire Master Plan. Included in the plan is a new fire station and training centre in Aurora, along with a new fire crew to serve both communities.

This will be phased in over six years by both municipalities at 1.3%.

‘We know there will be a significant investment due to growth,’ said Councillor John Abel, a member of the JCC. ‘Growth requires there should be another station and another crew. [Training and wellness] for the crews would pay off dividends, but we will come to that as we move along.’

While Council was supportive of reductions and the six year plan to lessen the impact on taxpayers, Councillors Wendy Gaertner and Paul Pirri said there needs to be more public education on how much of their tax dollars go toward fire services.

‘It is going to be a very expensive part of our budget going forward and I know the JCC is looking at ways to mitigate that,’ added Mayor Geoff Dawe.

During Monday's meeting, Aurora CAO Neil Garbe presented Council with a list of 13 budget items which could be shaved to bring the budget back down to its original forecast.

Council voted 6 ? 3 to maintain funding for the Aurora Cultural Centre at 2014's level of \$377,000, \$10,000 less than their request for this year. A request from the Aurora Chamber of Commerce for to waive user fees for the Stronach Aurora Recreation Complex to cover the relocation of the annual home show ? worth \$30,000 over three years ? was left out of the equation, while requests from the Historical Society and Library were reduced by \$2,500 and \$3,100 respectively.

A suggestion to save \$10,000 by reducing the number of waste calendars distributed to Aurora homes, however, was binned. If passed, it would have limited the print run on these booklets, with a move towards a web-based calendar and an increased emphasis on the Town's My Waste mobile app.

While Councillor Jeff Thom said that was a move in the right direction, Councillor Sandra Humfries was less sure, adding ‘people love using the calendar.’ Councillor Paul Pirri was of a similar view, stating reducing the distribution of calendars could be a hit on segments of the community who are less computer savvy, particularly some seniors. Instead, he suggested offsetting the cost of

producing the calendar by increasing advertising revenue. The Region of York currently advertises in the publication, but this should be opened up to the private sector, he said.

?I like the idea of selling advertising, but I am not sure where to draw the line with that one,? said Councillor Gaertner.

Over the last few years, Council has been making a concerted effort to wean itself off skimming some of the interest off the \$35 million in reserves left over from the sale of Aurora Hydro to buffer Aurora's tax rates.

Slated to lessen its reliance on the interest this year by \$100,000, halving this to \$50,000 was another option presented by Council to lessen the tax pressure. This, however, did not come to pass after significant opposition around the table.

?It will now buy less than it did in 2006,? said Councillor Michael Thompson of the diminishing purchase power of the Hydro Funds. ?There is a reason to keep that interest in there. It is the right thing to do and I don't want to reduce it at all.?

If Council stays the course on weaning itself off the interest at \$100,000 a year, it will be a reliance eliminated by the end of this Council term, he contended.

?There is no wiggle room for future years.?