

Budget talks begin with a 3.5 tax increase

By Brock Weir

The average Aurora homeowner could see a 3.5 per cent increase on the municipal portion of their tax bill if the Town's 2019 Operating Budget is approved as-is next month.

For the average Aurora property, now assessed at \$800,000, this translates into a total increase of about \$81 on the municipality's side of things.

Water rates are also on the rise in 2019 with the combined water and wastewater bills set to rise by 2.1 per cent and a 3 per cent increase for stormwater rates for residential property owners.

At the Regional level, lawmakers are eyeing a 4.37 per cent increase, which breaks down into a general tax hike of 3.37 per cent, plus an additional percentage point dedicated towards infrastructure.

Once settled, the Municipal and Regional tax increases will be weighted for a combined tax increase reflected on property tax bills for the fiscal year.

Council is currently in the midst of finalising the 2019 Capital Budget, which is set to be finalised this week before approval at the next Council meeting next Tuesday, February 26.

Talks surrounding the Operating Budget, the budget component that has the most direct impact on your tax rate, is slated to begin this Thursday, February 21, in a meeting set in Council Chambers from 5.45 to 10 p.m.

Council received the preliminary tax increase of 3.5 per cent at last Tuesday's General Committee meeting from Acting Treasurer Jason Gaertner, who said Council provided direction to staff last March to bring the Operating Budget in at inflation plus one per cent.

This year, inflation was set at 2.5 per cent, resulting in that 3.5 per cent impact. This is a preliminary figure and could fluctuate in either direction as budget talks continue. However, if anything further is added, there is very little wiggle room, said Mr. Gaertner. "Currently, staff have put forward a draft budget that comes to a total of 3.3 per cent tax pressure, leaving 0.2 per cent, or about \$94,000 in available room within the established target to put towards budget pressures that Council might like to approve," said Mr. Gaertner. "The proposed draft budget that is in front of you now essentially addresses all service expansion needs for a growing community, as well as our inflationary pressures that we're experiencing. Some of the pressures that are not included [are four pressures totalling] \$128,600. Council will have a traditional vote on what pressures they support and that \$94,100 will fund those pressures."

Contained within the proposed Operating Budget are fiscal strategies ranging from traditional contributions to infrastructure, a reduction of the Town's reliance on development revenues.

Pressures include right-sizing within Town Hall in various departments, cost of living (COLA) and step increases for union and non-union municipal employees, a .4 per cent pressure attributed to snow management, and a pressure at the same rate for utilities and heating pressures. Some of these, noted Mr. Gaertner, are offset by user fee increases that staff have been able to generate.

"What you get is a well-maintained infrastructure, sustained service levels, award-winning community events, a great variety of recreational and cultural opportunities for all ages, as well as a well-managed, fiscally sustainable community," said Mr. Gaertner.