

## Budget talks conclude at 3.91% tax hike

By Brock Weir

Aurora residents are set to face a 3.91 per cent tax increase, as Councillors wrapped up talks on Monday night.

While the 2015 Budget is set to receive final ratification at a Council meeting later this month, Councillors went into this week tackling a 3.95 per cent increase which was subsequently whittled down.

Council tasked staff with coming up with \$300,000 in further budget cuts earlier this spring, along with ways of generating a further \$100,000 in new revenues, to lessen the burden on taxpayers, targeting that magic number of 3.95 per cent. This week's talks, however, went a step further with a larger than proposed cut to the training and education budget for municipal staff.

These \$300,000 cuts came from a variety of areas across Town Hall, including the elimination of a budget item originally allocated for Business Achievement Awards hosted by the Aurora Chamber of Commerce, which has been put on ice for the past three years, a reduction to Aurora's legal advocacy and advertising budgets, a four-month gapping for new positions, and a reduction of dollars dedicated to Council training.

Suggestions for further cuts to the budgets of the Aurora Public Library and Aurora Cultural Centre, however, were ultimately nixed by Council.

Coupled with a hike from the Region of York, Aurora residents will see a combined tax increase of 2.69 per cent on their bills this year. For the average Aurora home assessed at \$500,000, this translates to an increase of \$129.95, the Town's share for which will be \$68.07.

Two of the biggest ticket items contributing to the tax cuts was the elimination of one full-time position at Town Hall. Discussions on the merits of eliminating this position were held in closed session, but resulted in a cut of \$108,000. The second big ticket item which generated the most discussion was a proposed cut of \$50,000 for staff training and education.

This has been an issue which has divided Council in recent months and following an amendment from Councillor Tom Mrakas to up the ante to a \$100,000 cut, it was a suggestion which was carried on a vote of 6 ? 3, with Mayor Geoff Dawe and Councillors Jeff Thom and Paul Pirri voting against.

In bringing forward the initial recommendation to reduce the \$196,000 training budget by \$50,000, staff cited actual figures on how much money was spent on training year after year. The numbers showed that nearly \$50,000 of this budget had not been spent. While staff said this budget figure was calculated on the number of employees and pooled, Councillors saw room to manoeuvre.

?I don't really see this as a reduction,? said Councillor Mrakas. ?I see this as removing a surplus. Personally, I believe we can reduce this item even further.?

This was a viewpoint shared by Councillor Harold Kim.

?There is value in training and development,? he said. ?But, right now the focus is on trying to make Aurora one of the Top 50 places to live as opposed to the Top 50 Places to Work. We need further cuts in the training and development area.?

Councillor Mrakas' motion to extend the proposed cut to \$100,000 was seconded by Councillor Wendy Gaertner, who said since \$48,000 was not spent the first suggestion was a ?no brainer?, but removing all training that was not mandatory or pertaining to health and safety left more areas to cut. A similar view was offered by Councillor Sandra Humfries, who said she sympathised with staff over the cuts, but this was a ?difficult year.?

While he supported the cuts, going the full \$100,000 was something that Councillor Michael Thompson said "concerned him" as there was not enough information to see what the ultimate impact might be on the Town as a whole. Also unsure of the impact was Councillor John Abel.

"I think this is a point this Council is trying to make to staff, and it is quite clear in my mind that this is what is taking place here," he said. "I truly believe in professional development and training, but I also believe in clarity" and I also respect the wishes of the new Council and if they want that clarity I am not going to stand in the way of that or their direction."

From Councillor Paul Pirri's perspective, however, the training and development budget was based on a formula and a system approved by Council and rather than cutting that portion of the budget this year, a review of that policy should be carried out to have this impact in future years.

"In this situation, I don't think the end justifies the means," he said. "We have to make sure as a Council we are doing things properly. At this point in time, I would like to see the budget reduced as a whole, but not just for this cycle. If we're not using the funding, we need to make sure the policies in place are well utilized by our staff."

A \$50,000 reduction was fine with Councillor Thom, but doubling that was an issue, he said. Those pushing for the cuts, he said, should be able to "make a case" to the rest of the table why they feel certain aspects of training shouldn't make the cut and why the "value isn't there."

"If those Councillors want to reduce it further, they will have to justify what programs they feel aren't worth spending on and justify to me why a \$50,000 reduction is inadequate in terms of a reduction in costs," he said. "I don't understand the rationale [behind \$100,000] other than it is a nice, round figure."

But that is a two-way street, added Councillor Kim.

"Given the lack of information we have received [on training] thus far, \$100,000 being a good, round number is good enough reason for me," he said. "I don't totally agree that those who want to cut the budget further by \$50,000 that that party has the burden of proof to provide that evidence. It should just as likely be the other side who wants to maintain or increase to have that burden of proof as well."