

2017 Budget moves forward for December 13 approval

By Brock Weir

Aurorans can expect to see the municipal portion of their tax bills increase by 3.1 per cent in 2017.

This is the final number settled on by Council last week in the final deliberations on the Town's Operating Budget before it comes up for formal Council approval next week.

Council held back-to-back Committee meetings last Monday and Tuesday to go over the final details of the Operating Budget. Earlier this fall, deliberations opened at a proposed tax increase of 2.9 per cent, 1.9 per cent of which was pegged to the rate of inflation with a further one per cent set to bolster the Town's reserves. This number, however, has fluctuated along with deliberations as adjustments were made in either direction.

At Tuesday's meeting, Council arrived at their final number in a new process put in place by CAO Doug Nadorozny which put the final 17 budget items on a scorecard with Council ranking their importance on a scale of 0 ? 10. Each Councillor's score for each individual item were tallied and ranked.

Falling off the chart and missing the final cut was a new contract position for a facilities supervisor with a price tag of \$60,200 and a \$70,000 boost for training municipal staff. Making it back in at the very last minute was a further \$45,000 to maintain the service levels of animal control in the growing community.

Among the priority items identified by Council was the creation of a new position of Economic Development Officer, \$15,000 towards commemorating the 150th Anniversary of Town Park, \$24,400 for the 2017 Multicultural Festival, a \$10,000 sponsorship for the Aurora Chamber of Commerce's re-constituted Business Excellence Awards, a \$15,500 infusion for the Aurora Museum & Archives for the creation of additional exhibits (in-person and online), converting a part-time position in the Town's Special Events department to full time to the tune of \$30,100, \$5,000 towards the establishment of Aurora's historic pet cemetery, and \$25,000 to offset gate and wrist band fees for the 2017 Ribfest.

?This is the second year in a row that we have basically given staff a number and they have come back at that number and we are finishing our budget in the beginning of December again,? said Councillor Tom Mrakas, praising this year's budget process, which included significant steering from the Town's Finance Advisory Committee. ?It speaks volumes to the amount of work staff and Council does in bringing this forward.?

The debate wasn't all rosy, however, as Council members offered different viewpoints on how to reach the final number.

Taking up a considerable chunk of the discussion were funding requests from Sport Aurora and the Aurora Sports Hall of Fame, both of which came in relatively late to the Budget game, being presented on Monday night.

As The Auroran reported last week, Sport Aurora sought additional funding effective April 1 to allow them to continue their work in many areas, including the delivery of the Town's Sport Plan, which they were contracted by the municipality to do. They needed, said Sport Aurora president Stephen Kimmerer, ?sustainable funding? for the future. This was a similar request made by the Aurora Sports Hall of Fame to have funding through 2019.

Council did not dispute the value of either community organization, opting to grant their funding out of the contingency funds rather than adding it to the residential tax increase, but it could be a very different story next year.

?We have invested a lot already and they do great work,? said Councillor Michael Thompson on the \$66,000 already spent this year to move the Aurora Sports Hall of Fame to the Stronach Aurora Recreation Complex. ?I think this way we can fund their shortfall this year and work with them in moving forward on how we close the gap for the years 2018 and 2019.?

Councillor John Abel said he agreed that it would have to be part of the Budget in future years, but others said they had an issue with their requests coming so close to them making a final budget decision.

?We need to set some criteria [on] when we ask these groups to come forward and make a presentation as to what they are looking for because I feel uncomfortable, quite frankly, when someone comes to the microphone during deliberations and puts forward a request I don't feel I can give it the proper attention to give it the consideration it is due,? said Mayor Geoff Dawe.

While Councillor Paul Pirri questioned the merits of funding such requests out of contingency funds as it is traditionally an account to cover unforeseen circumstances, Councillor Thompson brought tax surpluses later into the discussion. A surplus of taxes collected over the course of the year is not returned to residents, but put in a tax rate stabilization reserve, he said.

?I don't necessarily want to put a \$100,000 line item into the tax levy because then you are going to fund it year after year, but I think similar to the Sports Hall of Fame, there needs to be those conversations on the long-term outlook for these organizations and how they work,? he said. ?I think about all those surpluses we have taken and not given back to residents and just parked it in

reserves.?