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Water rates set to rise, but more efficient water meters still years away

By Brock Weir

Water bills in Aurora are set to rise once again this year.

Council is set to approve the 2017 combined water, wastewater and stormwater budget next week. Presented in a report at the Committee level last Tuesday, the recommendations were carried without discussion.

Once formally approved, as of May 1 the retail water rate will rise to $2.29 per cubic metre, while wastewater rates will be set at $2.04 per cubic metre. This is up 11.2 per cent and 14.8 per cent for water and wastewater, respectively, over 2016.

?The increase in the budget of 13 per cent is attributable to an increase in the regional wholesale rates for water and for wastewater treatment of nine per cent, an increase in contributions to reserves for the maintenance of underground infrastructure, and an increase in forecasted volume sales of 4.5 per cent,? said the proposal to Council. ?This is the first year since 2014 where an increased sales volume is being included, due to growth outpacing conservation.?

Garnering more discussion from Council members last week, however, was how Aurora actually measures water consumption.

Council has tentatively approved the replacement of up to 1,500 residential water meters this year, with a price tag of $502,500, excluding taxes.

The continued switch-out was initially discussed by Councillors last fall, but was halted amid questions raised over apparently significant cost increases for the switch-out as the years rolled on. However, information coming forward last week, poked a number of holes in the original report which only led to more questions.

Cost increases reflected in the previous report were actually cost fluctuations according to the size of the water meters in question, not what Councillors were initially told, chalking the differential up to the unpredictability of the Canadian-US exchange rate.

The new water meters, some of which are already installed in existing and new residential developments, will be markedly different from the meters in most homes, which, over the course of normal wear and tear, often lose accuracy ? leading to a loss of revenue for the Town.

The new meters leave the door open to phasing out meter readers going door to door to collect their data in favour of receiving near-continuous data collection at the Town from radio receivers.

?We have been running [the replacement program] for a full two years and we're just getting ready to launch our third summer of replacing approximately 1,000,? said Town Treasurer Dan Elliott. ?This year, we're going to see if we can get upwards of 1,500 but there are some resource issues on getting these processed and up to speed. These are the new smarter meters that have memory technology for the readings and the ability to radio read in the future.

?All of the new meters that have been going into 2C are the same meters, so we are advancing fairly rapidly as the population is growing, but it is still in the infancy. By 2019 we will be at a critical mass where we can deploy the antenna system. That will require some costs and that will include improved client service, improved monitoring and some operational cost savings.?

For some Councillors, however, it didn't go far enough as there wasn't data available at the moment to show cost savings realised to date by the installed meters.

?That variance should be shrinking little bit by little bit,? said Councillor Michael Thompson. ?I am still looking for actual metrics with regards to this program, some sort of indication that in doing this conversion we're actually capturing the loss that has happened in the past.?

Pinpointing an accurate number at this point would be difficult, replied CAO Doug Nadorozny as there are a number of variables including weather and growth.

?We could attempt to do it, but it would still be theoretical,? he said, unless Council wanted to test actual meters that had been taken out to show the inaccuracy.?

Others said they were interested in how the new water meters would alert the Town and homeowners alike on leaks that could result in unexpected spikes to the residential water bill.

?Sometimes people on limited incomes are strapped with a huge bill,? said Councillor John Abel.

Compounding the issue, said Mr. Elliott, is meter readers are only at a property once every 90 days and by the time a problem is detected water bills are ready for the mail.

?If we stop, we delay the bill, but there is not a whole lot we can do at that juncture, but we try to get a hold of that client, double check the [meter] read and say there is something going on in here and you have to do some homework. Without a significant investment in how we do our billing, whether it is more frequent billing or, whether in another couple of years with these new

meters, we are going to be at a point where we can then implement an antenna-based radio system and then we would have two-way communication.?
That would not be ready to deploy until 2019, he concluded.