

IN GOOD COMPANY: Aurora On Top

By Mayor Geoffrey Dawe

As some of you may know, MoneySense magazine recently published its list of Canada's Best Places to Live, ranking Aurora at No. 1 in York Region. This recognition reinforces the message to communities across the country that Aurora is a great place to live, work and play!

MoneySense ranked 201 communities across Canada, citing Aurora as 10th best in small cities and 24th overall. The analysis factored 33 metrics in 10 categories, including wealth, taxation, amenities, culture, crime rate and weather.

Aurora fared well across the broad range of categories, but of particular interest was the measure of property tax as a percentage of household income. Essentially, this metric gauges property tax levies against a homeowner's ability to pay. With 2.61 per cent of household income going to property taxes, Aurora was lower than all other municipalities in York Region.

This is a very telling statistic, and one that runs counter to the oft quoted belief that 'taxes are too high.' If anything can be gleaned from the numbers presented in this national ranking, it is that taxes in Aurora are well within our homeowners' ability to pay. This is a critical factor in establishing fairness in the local budget process.

During this municipal term, our Council has consistently delivered prudent, accountable budgets that make key investments in our community, while minimizing the financial impact to our ratepayers. I am very proud of the fact that we have kept tax increases to a minimum, while supporting the needs of our growing municipality.

On March 18, Council approved a 2014 Budget that included a local tax levy increase of 3.75 per cent. With Regional and educational portions, this translates to a 1.99 per cent increase to your property tax bill.

The 3.75 per cent includes 1.28 per cent for ongoing community safety, including final payment for the 20-person fire crew and additional fire truck approved in 2011, and 0.92 per cent for future infrastructure needs to ensure things such as damage from a severe winter will not spike property taxes. The remaining 1.28 per cent, well within the rate of inflation, will improve services and accommodate rising costs.

With the budget complete, our next challenge is the proposed Joint Operations Centre. I discussed the need for this facility, critical to servicing the operations of our growing community, in my January column and my February Keynote Address to the Aurora Chamber of Commerce.

We hosted a very successful Open House on February 8 at our operations depot on Scanlon Court, which gave our residents an opportunity to tour our dated facility and demonstrate the need for a new one. What became abundantly clear from the comments I received from the many who attended, was the great deal of misinformation and disinformation circulating, concerning the Joint Operations Centre.

I would like to remove the hyperbole and clearly state that as a capital project, this new facility will not affect property taxes.

On February 25, Council voted to proceed with tendering for the Joint Operations Centre. Our staff estimates a cost of \$19.8 million, fully funded from development charge revenues and the sale of surplus assets. With nearly 3,000 homes being built on our 2C lands, the Town is well poised to finance and proceed with this project.

On March 14, Newmarket-Aurora MP Lois Brown and I toured our operations depot on Scanlon Court while discussing the Government of Canada's Building Canada Fund and opportunities for Aurora to apply for these funds to offset the cost of the Joint Operations Centre.

I intend to aggressively pursue any available funding to assist in financing this new facility, and eagerly await the forthcoming criteria for the Building Canada Fund.

I invite anyone looking for more information on the proposed Joint Operations Centre or other Town services to join us at The Town of Aurora booth at the Aurora Chamber of Commerce Home Show at the Aurora Community Centre from April 11 to 13.

The Home Show provides a fantastic opportunity for residents to learn about the wealth of products and services our merchants offer. Please help support the Chamber and stop by our booth for information or just to say 'hello.'

I hope to see you there!