

Average tax bills set to rise \$89 following budget approval

By Brock Weir

It is the tax increase targeted from the outset, but Council made it official last week by approving a 1.8 per cent residential tax increase for the year ahead.

Combined forecasted tax increases from the Region of York ? with education taxes holding steady ? this is estimated to come out to a combined overall increase on your tax bill of 1.88 per cent, or \$89 per average household assessed at \$500,000.

?Council set an aggressive 2016 budget target that respects the economic and financial pressures families in our communities are facing,? said Mayor Geoff Dawe in a statement on Wednesday following the formal budget approval the previous evening. ?Staff worked hard to find efficiencies and apply constraint to achieve Council's target of a 1.8 per cent increase, our lowest increase in a decade. This budget maintains our services and improves the Town's future financial sustainability for infrastructure renewals. The 2016 budget is a reflection of Council's mandate to be fiscally responsible with the taxes we collect, while managing our community's needs now and in the future.?

Estimating the municipal portion of the tax hike to come out to \$31 (for \$500,000 assessment), this breaks down into \$7.78 more per household for fire and emergency services, \$5.44 for municipal facilities, \$3.66 for asset rehabilitation and replacement, \$2.91 for the Aurora Public Library, \$2.97 for parks and trails, \$2.65 for road operations, \$1.86 for waste collections, \$1.76 for snow management, 68 cents for culture services, 57 cents for bylaw enforcement, 36 cents for community programs, and 22 cents for animal control.

Funding for Central York Fire Services includes the phase-in of a new fire crew with a particular focus on the Aurora-Newmarket border, and a boost in funding to the Aurora Museum, Historical Society, and Cultural Centre to account for inflation.

At last week's Council meeting, members around the table were full of praise for the new budget process, which saw for the first time Council setting the maximum target for a palatable tax increase and tasking Town staff with making it happen. This, they said, got rid of the ?combative? nature of the budget process, which typically saw Mayor and Council hack away at departmental budgets bit by bit until it was whittled down to a more manageable size, and now allows staff to set priorities.

?Before we began?I don't think anyone around the table was happy with the process, the length of time involved, or how the discussions went,? said Councillor Michael Thompson. ?Some of the objectives in terms of [whether we could] have a successful process was for it to be a little bit more efficient with our time but also meeting a tax rate number everyone could feel comfortable with approving rather than the combative approach we have had previously.

?Here we are in the five years I have been on Council with the lowest tax increase we have seen yet. I look forward to the remainder of the term and continuing the same kind of work collectively to continue to develop and deliver a reasonable budget.?

Similar sentiments were offered by Councillor Tom Mrakas, who said staff did an ?excellent? job in responding to Council's concerns, particularly a one per cent general wage increase and an overall moratorium on new hires for the year ahead.

?The service levels are the same if not better and we are looking at those efficiencies,? he said. ?I think staff has done a lot of work, the finance committee has done a lot of work, and everyone worked together to bring something [with a vision] not only Council was comfortable with, staff was comfortable with, but the residents will be happy with at the end of the day. That is most important part. We did this for the residents and the Town as a whole.?

Councillor Harold Kim said he agreed with these points, noting this year's process was in marked contrast to last year.

?I am pleased in particular with our lesser reliance on the Hydro Funds,? said Councillor Kim, noting a further reduction of

\$100,000 from the typical amount skimmed off the interest accrued on Aurora's \$34+ million reserve fund established from the sale of Aurora Hydro, money that has, since then, been used to buffer the tax rate.

Added Mayor Dawe: ?I think this recognizes that we, as a Town, although we seem to be sprouting like crazy right now, are actually moving to a mature town stage as opposed to a growth stage. I think this helps us recognize a different way of doing business, so we certainly appreciate the direction from staff on that.?