

Budget talks could start with proposed 2.9 per cent tax increase

When Council approved its multi-year budget, it did so with an eye to provide more financial certainty for the average Aurora taxpayer, but this was before the global pandemic and a year that has provided anything but uncertainty.

At the time, Council was aiming for a 2021 tax increase of 3.4 per cent but as lawmakers gear up for budget talks later this month, staff have been tasked with delivering a budget that will see a residential tax increase of 2.9 per cent on the Town's portion of your tax bill.

The revised budget figure came into early focus at last week's General Committee meeting where Councillor Wendy Gaertner questioned what the proposed reduction will mean for the Town as a whole from an operations standpoint.

'Our 3.4 per cent tax levy was based on 1.9 per cent for operational costs ? inflationary pressures on operations, plus half a per cent for Library Square debt financing and 1 per cent for capital costs,' said Town Treasurer Rachel Wainwright-Van Kessel. 'We would not be doing anything that would change that Library Square financing costs, that would still need to remain along with the capital costs. That's the 1.5 per cent right there. We're looking at reducing that 1.9 by half a per cent. The other challenge we do have is our assessment growth is coming in lower than what we had forecasted in last year's budget. It is coming in about half a per cent lower, so overall we are needing to find about \$500,000 in savings in order to meet that 2.9.'

Helping staff to meet this request is funding from the Federal and Provincial Government's Safe Restart program, she added.

'We have a number of significant pressures relating to COVID-19 that we're forecasting for next year and that grant funding is going to help us manage those pressures along with some other one-time savings that we have for next year. We're not pushing these costs down the line. That funding will handle those one-time pressures of lost revenues related to COVID-19.'

'We are still working towards getting to that 2.9 per cent. We look forward to presenting the budget to you later this month and we're just waiting for the finalization of the Central York Fire Services Budget next week at the JCC meeting. Once we have that, we should be able to finalize our numbers. Our goal is not to push any thing down the line [but] still make the initiatives that were included in the multiyear budget last year.'

The figure of 2.9 per cent was recently discussed at the Town's Financial Advisory Committee and the three Councillors who sit on that committee ? Councillors Wendy Gaertner, John Gallo and Michael Thompson ? were all concerned with budget pressures this year being passed on to future years, said Councillor Thompson.

'We were quite clear that we're happy to strive to achieve the goal of 2.9 per cent but do not want to see it done at the detriment to future years,' he said. 'So, staff have been responsive, that they could achieve that goal without doing so, but it is a wait-and-see. [The treasurer and her team] are working hard towards that goal and we will see?at Budget in the coming weeks.'

By Brock WeirEditorLocal Journalism Initiative Reporter