

Budget talks target training and education at Town Hall

By Brock Weir

Aurora's proposed residential tax increase for 2015 currently stands at 4.44 per cent, following deliberations Monday night on how to lessen this year's impact on taxpayers.

Council went into this week's budget meeting facing a 5.09 per cent proposal, but cuts were made in two key areas ? a \$30,000 reduction in advertising championed by Councillor Wendy Gaertner, and a \$100,000 reduction in the proposed \$196,500 budget for training and development for Council and Town Hall employees, suggested by Councillor Tom Mrakas.

Although there were calls around the table to task Town Staff with finding ways to reduce the tax impact by a further \$100,000, there is still at least one further budget debate scheduled for next Monday, with the final figures to be signed, sealed and delivered at a Council meeting in April.

Accounting for tax increases coming from the Regional level, a 4.44 per cent impact on the municipal portion of your tax bill translates into a combined rate of 2.88 per cent for 2015.

By the time this week's meeting came to suggestions from Council on how to reduce the tax rate, much of the discussion focused on Councillor Mrakas' suggestion to reduce the budget for 'training and development' by \$100,000.

'We can look at cutting something like this just for this year and do it on an every other year basis in future years,' said Councillor Mrakas, on the budget item which allows Council members and staff to attend training sessions and carry out courses in a variety of areas. 'It is something we can cut and it won't affect service levels.'

Aurora CAO Neil Garbe, however, said he 'felt really strongly' about leaving that budget item as is, saying he believes it is what sets Aurora apart as an employer.

'That is how we produce innovation, that is how we produce results, that is how we invest in our personnel, that is how we retain our personnel, and that is part of the attractiveness,' said Mr. Garbe. 'We, at the Town of Aurora, do not pay what other municipalities pay. Part of the attractiveness is knowing that [there are] a certain amount of training dollars available to them. To take that away from staff sends a disheartening message to them.'

The number of staff that take part in such programs is 'selective' and based on applicability, he added, noting that for some professionals employed by the Town, training and development sessions can be mandatory.

'We're trying to invest in our employees to have a succession plan in place and the more we invest in our employees, they will stick around and it is better for the organization,' he said. 'I feel really strongly about it.'

Councillors felt very strongly about it too on both sides of the fence.

Councillor Sandra Humfries was a reluctant supporter of the suggestion to knock that part of the budget down, saying when push comes to shove, these training and development sessions are often the first things on the block.

'You want to have employee satisfaction, but sometimes when you look outside the public sector and other organizations, sometimes things happen,' she said. 'We [can] allocate training and development where we want it for that one year and we want to cut it back for those who really need it and keep them employed [but] we're looking at quite an increase. It looks like we're doing additional training.'

'We understand there is a mandatory training requirement' but the rest it is not mandatory. It is not unheard of to say, 'Sorry, guys, I hate to do this, but we can't do training like we did.' I hate that story, and it is not the story I want to share with my employees, but I

have had that story time and again when we have budget constraints. Our budget increase is the highest we have had in four years. Do we really want to announce five per cent and not kick this a little bit??

Councillor Jeff Thom, on the other hand, opposed voting in favour of this last week until a further report came to Council outlining the impact such a cut would have on the Town of Aurora. If cuts were to come, staff shouldn't be the ones immediately impacted, he argued.

?If Council's decision is to reduce training and development, the first place we should do it is our own,? he said. ?I am not certain it is necessary to cut, but if we do decide to cut, that's where we start. You have got to have a breakdown of what you're going to miss. If you want to reduce [the budget] by another \$100,000, go to the total amount. That way staff has the flexibility [to find the cuts]. If we don't have information, why are we voting on this??

The \$100,000 cut was tentatively approved by Council in a vote of 4 ? 3, with Councillors Gaertner, Humfries, Harold Kim, and Mrakas voting in favour and Councillors John Abel, Thom, and Michael Thompson voting against. Mayor Geoff Dawe and Councillor Paul Pirri were not at the meeting.

Budget deliberations continue next Monday, March 30 at 7 p.m. in Council Chambers.