

2.4% tax increase set for approval this week

By Brock Weir

Aurora residents will see their combined residential tax bill rise by 2.4 per cent in the year ahead.

Council is poised to give their final approval to the 2018 Budget this week.

Their approval will see the municipal portion of your tax bill rise 3.1 per cent which, when calculated and weighted with a 2.87 per cent tax increase on the Regional portion of the tax bill, along with a neutral impact on the educational contribution, this comes out at a combined rate of 2.4 per cent.

For the average Aurora residential property assessed at \$770,000, homeowners can expect to see an increase of \$168.29 for the year (\$80.52 for Aurora's portion).

The increase of 3.1 per cent is in keeping with the target set by Council earlier this year and has been achieved through several meetings' worth of negotiations.

At its July 2016 meeting, Council approved specific budget preparation directions for staff, says Town Treasurer Dan Elliott in his report before Council this week. The base budget was to result in a tax increase of not more than inflation, with a further 1 per cent increase to assist in funding the Town's long term financial strategies related to unsustainable revenues and needed funding for infrastructure sustainability.

In short, this extra one per cent will go further to reduce the Town's reliance on interests from the Hydro Reserves and other sources to keep the tax rate down.

Despite inflation reported at 2.1 per cent for 12 months to June 2016, staff presented Council with a base operating budget proposal with a resulting tax increase of 1.9 per cent plus the 1 per cent for fiscal strategies.

This left Council with just under \$100,000 to work with in order to accommodate various extras including presentations for budget consideration made by individuals and community groups before the final numbers were crunched.

Budget meetings proper wrapped up on November 27 and staff were left to figure out how to bring the budget down by .2 per cent from 3.3., or by \$72,400 over the targeted final figure.

These adjustments were approved by Council at the committee level this week and entailed factoring in expected surpluses from a variety of Town programs, including an expected surplus of \$30,000 in revenues from municipal aquatics programs, a further \$16,000 in revenues from youth programs and reductions in areas such as shrub bed maintenance and eliminating the Town's Citizen Budget survey program.

Between the time the budget was drafted, which was, for all intents and purposes, in September, in terms of those operational numbers and now, we have the benefit of a third quarter report for 2017, explained CAO Doug Nadorozny at last week's General Committee meeting. What we endeavour to do is look at the surpluses that were being presented in 2017. We went back and looked at 2016 actual numbers as well and compared those surpluses. Where we saw a pattern of surpluses, we took a conservative approach and allowed for some of that difference to be suggested as a modification to the budget.

In the case of pretty much all of these, the variance is actually larger than what we're proposing here but, to be safe, we're taking a portion and we feel very confident it is an acceptable modification on the budget based on 2016 final [numbers] and the 2017 year to date.

As for the Citizen Budget, the online tool which has allowed residents to log onto the Town's website and, using a sliding scale on the screen, provide feedback on where they would like to see budget adjustments made, it is being discontinued due to an apparent lack of interest on the part of citizens.

We have realised that despite our best efforts, I wasn't personally satisfied with the response and I think the Financial Advisory Committee felt the same, said Stephanie Mackenzie Smith, Manager of Corporate Communications for the Town. We certainly want to continue to engage the public on that matter, but we'll look at much cheaper or free alternatives to be able to do that.

Overall, the final 2017 Operating Budget will entail planned expenditures totalling \$60,814,800, and \$18.99 million of it will be funded through non-tax revenues such as investment income, user fees, and Federal gas dollars.

The balance, \$41,821,700 will be funded through property taxes.