

2.4% tax increased approved at last Council of 2016

By Brock Weir

Aurora households can expect a 2.4 per cent tax increase in the New Year, following Council's approval of the 2017 Municipal Operating Budget last week.

Council signed off on the final component of the complete 2017 Budget last Tuesday at the final formal Council meeting of the year. Aurorans will see a 3.1 per cent rise on the municipal portion of their tax bill next year, which breaks down to a 2.1 per cent increase to the cost of municipal services, plus a further 1 per cent infusion to reserve accounts.

Combined with a tax increase from the Region of York, this will combine to a 2.4 per cent overall tax increase, or approximately \$168 more for the average Aurora property assessed at \$770,000.

‘We are pleased that staff and Council were able to work together collaboratively to provide a budget that is fiscally responsible yet ensures we are maintaining and enhancing our Town in a way that makes it a premier community to live, work and play,’ said Mayor Geoff Dawe in a statement following the approval. ‘We are grateful for the feedback of our residents throughout this process and are happy to say that their voices were heard. Citizen participation in the budget is critical and we want to thank all those who contributed their thoughts and ideas.’

Over the course of last week's discussions, Council members were full of praise for the process that led up to the completed budget, particularly the Town's Finance Advisory Committee setting a direction on what kind of tax increase is acceptable, and for staff in meeting those targets.

That being said, however, they said there is always room for improvement.

‘Where I would like to see us step up next year is to look for more efficiencies to what we do,’ said Councillor Tom Mrakas. ‘There are a couple of things we have approved that I don't necessarily agree with and I am sure there are a couple other people who probably feel the same way, but as a majority we approved what we have. For me, a lot of times what I see happening is when something comes forward and we say we need to increase service levels, or we need to do this, and we need to do that, the first response we get is we need new staff, we need to hire someone.’

‘To me, that is the wrong approach to take. We need to look at what we can do to utilize the staff that we already have and create those efficiencies within what we have, and look at providing the same or better service for the same or less money. At the end of the day I believe that is our job to get to that point. I believe it is also the job of senior management staff. We're all looking to provide the best service for our residents at the best possible price.’

A similar view was offered by Councillor Paul Pirri: ‘We gave staff a target, they met the target. I agree with Councillor Mrakas that not everything is exactly the way I would like to see it, but we do make decisions on consensus on the whole. It meets the target we set and I think services are going to be greatly improved.’

Councillor Michael Thompson, Chair of the Finance Advisory Committee, said the comparatively new budget process is ‘working much better’ than years past, and efficiency and value is always a driver, but longer-range planning is in order. The Councillor asked Treasurer Dan Elliott whether this was something that would be considered soon, but Mr. Elliott said that would be some time away.

‘We are already looking at some of the planning for the 2018 budget,’ said Mr. Elliott. ‘We need to be more consistent in our longer-range operating planning in our departments, both from a revenue side, but also an operational service levels perspective. That framework is in its infancy, but it needs to continue to mature.’

‘I think perhaps during the next term of Council we will be in a position to look longer-range at specific forecasts, very similar to what the Region of York is in the discipline of doing. However, I can say that our experience this year of inflation-plus style of

budget is probably in order for the next couple of years as well. I want to say we could achieve those, but we haven't sat down as a collective team [to see that] it is possible yet.?

For Councillor Thompson, this should be a goal for this term or the next one because Aurora's continual march towards build-out can provide some challenges down the road.

?What we can do during the rest of this term to move that bar forward and get us there, I certainly would encourage it. I would also like to ask that we start looking at the citizen budget survey,? said Councillor Thompson. ?One of the things that was frustrating this time around was we really didn't take a look at enhancing the citizen budget tool until late in the process and unfortunately the vendor didn't necessarily have the time to accommodate all that we were asking them to do. I think there is no time like the present to start taking a look at it.?