

2014 Aurora budget approved with 3.75% tax hike

By Brock Weir

Aurora Council approved its 2014 budget last week, resulting in a 3.75 per cent hike to the municipal portion of your tax bill.

Combined with further tax increases from the Region of York, as well as education tax, homeowners can expect a combined tax rate jump of 1.99 per cent overall.

Broken down into dollars and cents, the average Aurora homeowner whose property is valued at \$550,000 can expect to pay an extra \$109.44 this year. For commercial properties also valued at \$550,000, owners can expect an increase of \$122.51.

Aurora's 2014 Budget represents an overall budget of \$63 million for the municipality. Items within the budget include \$140,000 additional funding to Central York Fire Services, the fire department shared between Aurora and Newmarket, for the now complete multi-year phase in of 20 new crew members in Aurora, an increase in insurance premiums as well as cost of living increases for municipal employees at Town Hall, \$208,000 in contributions to infrastructure reserves, and \$110,000 additional funding for the Aurora Public Library.

New initiatives include \$3 million to convert Aurora's existing street lights to LED lights, a \$220,000 investment in the creation of a Community Improvement Plan for Downtown Aurora, \$150,000 for a new accessible playground at Queen's Diamond Jubilee Park (formerly Civic Square Park), and continued work on the Aurora Promenade.

In a statement released Wednesday, Mayor Geoffrey Dawe said he was "extremely pleased with the budget" in addressing these and other items "while keeping our combined tax levy increase below two per cent.

Discussions, however, were decidedly more heated the previous evening as Councillors prepared to sign off on the document.

"I think, as a whole, Council has worked to reduce this budget as much as possible," said Councillor Paul Pirri. "I think you can always try to do more and you can always try to make suggestions, but this is a good compromise and we kept it below two per cent, which is a goal of a lot of people."

The next speaker was Councillor Wendy Gaertner, who caused tempers to flare when she said over \$300,000 was included in the budget as "supplementary taxes", taxes which would flow into Town coffers mid-year, when that was not the case.

"Council is aware that we will not actually be receiving this revenue," she said.

Town Treasurer Dan Elliott, however, countered that this item for \$325,000 is clearly labelled as a draw from Aurora's stabilization reserves to make up for a shortfall in supplementary taxes that is expected this year. \$250,000 is expected to come into the Town, and the \$325,000 would be drawn from reserves to bring \$575,000 to the table to keep things in line with last year.

Supplementary taxes, he added, are "volatile" and difficult to predict and if Aurora budgeted for \$325,000 less than they expected last year, the Town's tax rate would have to increase by nearly a full percentage point. Next year should be better as more properties in Aurora's 2C development come into being.

"We have a line item for \$250,000 and a separate line item for \$325,000 from tax rate stabilization," he said. Councillor Gaertner, however, was undeterred.

"However you want to look at it, this is smoke and mirrors for an election year and I will be voting against this," she said. With that, a number of Councillors said they were "offended" and "concerned" with her comments.

"I do find it a little bit odd that a Councillor would speak of 'smoke and mirrors' when, since 2007, six budgets voted for the

approval of the use of supplementary taxes at a \$400,000 level, and here we are below that," said Councillor Michael Thompson. "It must be an election year."

Added Councillor Sandra Humfries, "If there is that kind of feeling throughout the process, it should be deliberated and put on the table at that moment, not on the day we are going to be approving the budget.

"I am not happy that there is an increase of that nature, but it could not be avoided."

For Councillor John Abel, Council worked hard going through just about every item in the budget. He said the "smoke and mirrors" comment was "irresponsible" and did not reflect the reality.

"I consider it good management and a way to stabilize [tax rates] to the taxpayer," he said. "We are trying to do a very important role here. We have spent a great deal of time [on this] and to bring it up at Council when we are approving it is inappropriate, in my opinion."

Also speaking out against the budget were Councillors John Gallo and Chris Ballard. For Councillor Gallo, his objections included increases to Aurora's tax premiums which came up near the end of December, nearly two months after budget deliberations kicked off, as well as cost of living increases at Town Hall.

Additional concerns included the new accessible playground which, he said, "should never have seen the light of day."

For Councillor Ballard, the 3.75 per cent tax increase for the municipal portion of the tax bill was out of whack with inflation. Many Aurorans are on fixed incomes, he argued, with some seeing their incomes decreasing, and more should have been done to peg Aurora's tax increase to this inflation. He also suggested he viewed revenue projections from new developments as overly optimistic in the budget.

"I am not confident in our revenue projections, not because we have made a mistake, but I think we are overconfident in the state of the building industry and how fast we will be moving ahead," said Councillor Ballard, noting he was against drawing from stabilization reserves to make up the shortfall.

"I have philosophical concerns about those funds using tax dollars from residents today being spent on residents of tomorrow."

Mayor Dawe, however, disagreed with his view on drawing from reserves.

"One of the things I want as a resident is consistency when I receive my taxes," he said. "I think this is a very prudent way to do that."