

2014 Fire Budget should be tightened, says Council

By Brock Weir

If Aurora Council gets its way, the proposed \$10 million increase to next year's fire budget will be a little bit tighter.

Councillors are expected to sign off on a number of requests this week to the Joint Council Committee, the group of Aurora and Newmarket Councillors appointed to oversee the Central York Fire Services, to rein in some spending.

Recommendations and requests are, however, as far as Aurora's authority goes in legislating the final budget of the fire service shared between Aurora and Newmarket, as Newmarket is the final signing authority.

“Aurora Council must be given the opportunity to provide comment and input into the budget cycle before Newmarket makes final approval of the fire budget,” said Aurora Treasurer Dan Elliott last week. “Newmarket is on a very aggressive 2014 budget schedule. They're hoping for final budget approval by the end of October and so we back that up and here we are.

“The 2013 Budget has a number of key issues that are driving the bottom line: the increase in salaries and wages, including staff for the new crew. The new crew are still maturing through the pay scale and they have another step this year. This is an arbitrated, unionized environment of individuals who are in a no-strike position.”

Other key factors in the 10 per cent budget increase include money to secure a training facility for firefighters in Newmarket, which the Central York Fire Services (CYFS) currently receives for free, a \$7.2 million increase in salaries and benefits, potential new officers for training and fire prevention, the change of one existing part-time position to full-time, and some incidental vehicle replacements.

Aurora's share of the 2014 budget is down slightly from last year due to several factors, including share of population, and share of emergency calls located in each municipality.

“We're constantly looking for ways to prune the budget and be more cost-effective on those services we can and the money that taxpayers are expecting,” said CYFS Chief Ian Laing.

Councillors, nevertheless, were looking for further ways to shave the budget. Councillor Paul Pirri, for instance, questioned whether it would be more cost-effective, or even possible, to contract out firefighter training. Under the current collective agreement with CYFS firefighters, however, this would be a violation of terms, said Chief Laing.

Others, such as Mayor Geoffrey Dawe, questioned what the CYFS would say if they granted just one new officer position ? Fire or Training ? which one would be the priority for the department.

“The addition of a fire prevention officer to our current station would not be able to be accommodated until the renovations are completed [to Station 4-1],” said Chief Laing. “There would not be physical space and these are late breaking items. If I were asked, the Chief Training Officer and the administration person from part-time to full time would be the two priorities.”

Mayor Dawe also questioned whether a \$40,000 item included in the budget for water softeners would be necessary moving forward.

“We have very delicate equipment,” replied Chief Laing. “We spend a couple million for water and now Aurora is getting more lake water. We're finding the equipment has trouble keeping the water spots off the fire trucks. We're spending \$500,000 on a fire truck and they are struggling to make them look as good as they should.”

Following the debates, Councillors resolved to request the JCC to consider removing one of the two full-time positions and the water

softeners from this year's budget, and any and all additional ways they can think of to reduce the budget impact.

Those are recommendations Councillors are expected to ratify this week, but last Tuesday's debate had input from only one of three Aurora Councillors on the JCC ? Councillor John Abel. Councillors Chris Ballard and John Gallo were not in attendance.

JCC next meets in September.