

3.42% tax hike slated for approval next week

By Brock Weir

Aurora's 3.42 per cent tax hike is expected to be approved next Tuesday following final consideration at the Committee level this week.

The tax hike represents a total tax levy of \$33,015,900 this year and when combined with the 1.49 per cent tax increase from the Region of York and school taxes, it will result in homeowners seeing a 2.02 per cent increase on their overall tax bill.

Councillors came to this number after whittling down the initially forecast 2013 tax increase of 8.2 per cent for this year. Challenges that will be addressed with this tax increase, according to Town Treasurer Dan Elliott, will include the increased cost of fire services, which accounts for 1.69 per cent of the 3.42, increased benefits and salaries costs at the municipal level, ongoing repair and maintenance on infrastructure such as roads and sidewalks, and generally a weakened economy.

As a result of the weakened economy, the Town's assessment base grew by only 1.3 per cent for the 2013 taxation year, compared to 1.75 per cent for 2012 and 2.7 per cent for 2011, said Mr. Elliott, in his report to Council. This reduced growth will somewhat limit the Town's ability to accommodate this growth and inflation without tax increase.

By January, the 8.2 per cent tax hike originally proposed in the fall had been reduced to 5.17 per cent after a detailed review by each department head of what they would actually need for this year. With that in place, the deliberations amongst Councillors began. Savings found included the number of new employees requested by municipal departments, adjusting money allocated for reserve accounts, using the forecast \$400,000 tax surplus from 2012 to offset the large price tags on the continued phase in of the new fire crew and the nearly \$300,000 earmarked to be put in place to combat the devastating result of the emerald ash borer, an invasive insect that will likely wipe out nearly every ash tree in Aurora.

Once this budget increase is approved by Council, Mr. Elliott forecasts a 3.74 per cent increase in 2014 and a 1.2 per cent increase in 2015.

Key pressures in 2013, which will be evaluated during 2013, include contributions to a reserve to fund the expected removal and replacement of ash trees, increased contributions to infrastructure reserves, the final phase-in of the costs of the new fire crew added in 2011, as well as the onset of operating costs of a new youth centre, which is expected to open in 2014.

Further, the 2015 forecast currently includes an increase in operating costs related to the ongoing discussions in respect to the care and display of historical cultural artefacts. The year is also expected to see a drop in planning application fees as the work on the 2C lands around St. John's Sideroad and Leslie Street begins to move past the planning stages and into construction phases.

Also coming forward for discussion this week in advance of final approval on March 26 are increases to your water bill. The average residential water bill is expected to increase by just under \$35 for the year for water and nearly \$34 for wastewater for an overall rise of 9.7 per cent.

Just in time for budget discussions as well is a breakdown of expenses claimed by Mayor and Council above their base salaries and benefits. Mayor Geoffrey Dawe has claimed \$5,313.54 in expenses, but leading the Council pack is Councillor Paul Pirri with \$3,183.43 claimed, trailed by Councillor John Abel with \$3,014.46. Bottoming the list are Councillors Chris Ballard (\$559.68) and John Gallo (\$636).

Item covered in these expenses include training and seminars, special events, out of town mileage, meals, alcohol (none are claimed), subscriptions, and other.