

## Aurora tax increase stands at 3.81%, final approval set for February 25

**By Brock Weir**

February 10 will be your final chance to make a last-minute pitch to Council on the 2014 Budget.

Councillors wrapped up deliberations on the 2014 Operating Budget Monday night. The session focused on the Aurora Public Library, Aurora Cultural Centre, Aurora Historical Society and the Central York Fire Services.

All things considered, the Town's proposed tax hike now stands at 3.81 per cent. Combined with tax increases from the Region of York, as well as education taxes, this comes to a combined tax increase of 2.02 per cent on residential tax bills. Residents can expect to see an increase of \$20.15 on their tax bills per \$100,000 of assessed value, or \$80.60 for the year on the average Aurora property valued at \$400,000.

Going into Monday's meeting, the proposed increase stood at 3.73 per cent for the Town's share of the tax rate. Following the approval of the \$3.4 million budget for the Aurora Public Library, Council also authorised a \$7,000 increase to funding for the Aurora Cultural Centre. A large portion of this increase, however, stems from a \$20,000 extra boost to the Aurora Historical Society (AHS).

The beleaguered local heritage body, which owns and operates Hillary House, continues to struggle to make ends meet. Despite fundraisers, they are in the red and continue dipping into their reserves, which now stand at less than \$100,000.

This has triggered a need to evaluate their future, AHS president Suzanne Reiner told Councillors. The Society has laid off one employee, a curator largely tasked with maintaining and researching the Aurora Collection before those artefacts were acquired by the Town of Aurora, and converted their two remaining full-time positions to part-time.

"By reducing our staff, it is going to change how we deliver programs," said Ms. Reiner, noting her pride in what they have achieved.

She credits their efforts in building awareness of the society in the community to attracting eight new members to the AHS board, who will be confirmed in their posts in February.

"We're asking for \$70,000 to achieve [our goals] so maybe we can hire back that staff to keep our programs running," she said, adding in particular, efforts with an educator to bring heritage programming into local schools. "I would [hate to lose that] before we have a chance to develop that."

Councillors were largely supportive of their request to keep them going, arguing that this will help them make ends meet as they turn the corner.

Further funds would also go towards providing cost of living increases for remaining staff, upgrading computers, work on furnaces on the site, continued restoration, and bringing in an arborist to help address cleanup following the ice storm.

There are also considerations being made towards the future of Hillary House itself. While it is a designated National Historic Site, it receives no funding from the Federal Government for upkeep. It has also been at the centre of the controversial Hillary-McIntyre Park proposal, but talks regarding the building's ownership are also taking place between the AHS and the Ontario Heritage Trust.

"I will present my report [on the Trust] at the next board meeting next week because they are just waiting for direction from us on what we are going to do," Ms. Reiner told Council. "It will be a beneficial help to us and we will see what direction that takes us."

Speaking in favour of the budget, their request was moved by Councillor Sandra Humfryes and seconded by Councillor Chris Ballard. She said the AHS needs it and it would be money well spent.

?I think what you need to do is just take a little bit of time to focus more and really figure out what you need to do to take some of the better results of the program and maybe go back to smaller events where you can get full force fundraising,? she said, referring to the 2013 Hillary House Ball.

Added Councillor Ballard: ?We are concerned, maybe not about the fate of the Society because I think it will carry on long into the future, but [about] that jewel on Yonge Street. I will be watching and listening and I am very interested in what the board comes up with and where the community goes with that.

?While I do have some concerns, I feel this is a really important year for yourselves and Hillary House.?

Councillor Paul Pirri, on the other hand, was less enthusiastic about the plan. Citing nearly tripled deficits over the last four years, he suggested it is time to refocus.

?I am not sure the Town's monies will be well invested in this manner,? he said.

Councillors also tasked staff with finding more ?creative? ways to fund the \$20,000 increase without making it a tax burden before final approval.