

Budget deliberations begin this week with proposed 2.2 per cent tax increase

Council talks over Aurora's 2026 Budget began on Monday night after a 2.2 per cent municipal tax increase was formally presented to local lawmakers by Mayor Tom Mrakas on October 28.

Originally announced by Mayor Mrakas on October 20, last week's Council meeting was the first formal chance Council as a whole had to address what the Mayor says is a plan that "invests in our community, protects our services, and ensures a strong, sustainable future for our Town."

The proposed 2.2 per cent figure could fluctuate before final approval as community partners prepare to make their presentations to Council, but the figure currently on the table is one Mayor Mrakas said offers taxpayers "savings without sacrificing service."

"This plan invests in our community, protects our services, and ensures a strong, sustainable future for our Town," he said. "As everyone is aware, the budget process affords Councillors the freedom to propose amendments, make changes, or chart a different course if they choose. I welcome the feedback in that discussion, but let me be clear: the budget I've tabled tonight is one I support because it's balanced, responsible, and, above all, puts the people of Aurora first."

This year's proposed budget is down from the 2.9 per cent originally envisioned through the Town's multi-year budget forecast, and includes a 0.6 per cent increase for municipal operations, 0.6 per cent for the Central York Fire Services, and 1 per cent allocated for municipal reserves.

This reduction, explained Town Treasurer Rachel Wainwright van-Kessel is attributed to cost savings related to the elimination of the consumer carbon tax, the deferral of four previously-anticipated new hires at Town Hall, and the postponement of some projects.

"Throughout the budget, staff met with the CAO and we had lots of discussions, and we really took a look at opportunities where we could find savings," said Wainwright-van Kessel. "One of the savings that was helpful for the overall budget was savings on heating, which relates to savings on the consumer carbon tax."

"There is also some removal of inflationary increases relating to our community partners. Part of the Budget was we were trying to find savings and also not change service levels. By removing those inflationary increases, the community partners are going to come here on November 10, they're going to share with us their budgets, and it's going to give Council the opportunity to decide if that inflationary increase should be added back to the Budget through a Budget amendment."

One such area Councillors questioned at the first sweep last week was the impact of removing the 1 per cent allocated for reserves. Responding to the question posed by Ward 2 Councillor Rachel Gilliland, the Treasurer said if that was removed for 2026 "we would need to remove about \$6.3 million from the Capital Plan worth of projects."

"That would mean that if it doesn't go into the levy this year, and we don't double up next year, we're going to have a shortfall in all future years moving forward". It does have significant downstream impacts. We do need to try and work towards meeting some of our Asset Management obligations and this 1 per cent levy does go towards doing that and it helps maintain the assets we have."

Councillor Gilliland also asked staff if there were any projects remaining within the plan that might be deferred to the following year. The Treasurer cautioned that if projects are moved down the line, they could be subject to inflation and cost more when the time comes.

"That leaves a lot of work to be done and a lot of guesstimating, but, at the same time, we're trying to be realistic about what's in the future for our spending," said Councillor Gilliland.

Should the Budget pass as is, the average local homeowner whose home is assessed at \$800,000, can expect to see the municipal

portion of their tax bill rise \$56.94 in the year ahead. The average homeowner can also expect to see their residential water bill rise by approximately \$19.26.

As Budget talks continue, the Region of York is looking at a 3.22 per cent tax increase on their portion of the tax bill, with a further 1 per cent allocated for transit infrastructure.

"I know this is an election year; naturally, there will be differing opinions, but my focus remains on what matters most: delivering results for our residents and keeping Aurora moving forward," said Mayor Mrakas in his Budget presentation last week. "Over the past year, I've heard from residents across Aurora in coffee shops, on sports fields, and at community events. People have told me that the cost of living is rising and they expect their local government to show the same restraint and discipline they're showing at home. This budget answers that call. It's responsible, it's balanced, and it's built to keep Aurora fiscally strong, not just this year, but for years to come.

"This Budget continues to deliver visible results across our Town: new and upgraded playgrounds for families, more pickleball courts and sports facilities to keep our community active, trail connections that bring neighbourhoods closer together, accessibility and facility improvements across Town buildings, replacing aging Town vehicles to improve efficiency, continued work on the Yonge Street streetscape, strengthening our historic downtown. At the same time, we're investing in essentials: our roads, water, and sewer infrastructure - the backbone of a safe, reliable community.

"Aurora's success hasn't happened by accident. Even through challenging times, a global pandemic, supply chain issues, and inflationary pressures, we've kept taxes low, maintained services, and delivered major improvements. We've done it while consistently maintaining one of the lowest tax rates in the GTHA. Aurora continues to be recognized as one of the best places in Canada to live, work, and raise a family. And that doesn't happen without discipline. It happens because we've made smart choices and stayed focused on what matters most: the people of Aurora. As we move forward, our goal remains clear: Keep Aurora vibrant, keep Aurora fiscally strong, and keep Aurora as one of the best places to live, work, and play. We're not just planning for the next Budget year, we're planning for the next generation."

By Brock Weir
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