

Budget set for approval Tuesday with 3.42 percent tax increase

By Brock Weir

After months of debate and negotiations, Aurora's 3.42 per cent tax hike for 2013 is slated for final approval this week.

Councillors are expected to have one final discussion surrounding the 2013 budget at Council this Tuesday before a vote. This last step comes after one final presentation and discussion over the budget at committee level last week, which was essentially their last kick at the can to make suggestions on how to tweak that number. Despite many questions over the bottom line, what came out of the General Committee meeting was exactly what came in ? 3.42.

It has been a long road to get to this point, however. After a series of meetings, deliberations, staff revisions, and public consultations, Councillors have come to the 3.42 increase on the Town's portion of the tax bill after whittling it down from the initial 8.2 per cent tax hike floated last fall.

Reductions stemmed from a closer look at what Town departments ?such as Customer and Legislative Services and Parks and Recreation ? actually needed to keep service levels as they are within the community.

When combined with the 1.9 per cent tax increase from the Region of York and school taxes, this 3.42 per cent tax increase on the Town's side of things will result in a combined tax hike of 2.02 per cent on the average tax bill.

Taking this 3.42 bit by bit, 2.12 per cent of the number can be attributed to ?running Aurora today?, according to the Town. This includes regular budget increases from both Central York Fire Services (the fire department jointly governed by the Towns of Aurora and Newmarket) and the Aurora Public Library, as well as addressing other cost factors such as inflation. The remaining 1.3 per cent is for laying the groundwork for Aurora's future such as roads and other infrastructure.

?Our total 2013 tax levy is about \$33 million for the Town's share,? said Dan Elliott, Treasurer for the Town of Aurora last week, noting a total \$51,300,000 of expenses in the budget. ?Other than staffing costs, the total operating expense, net the non-tax revenue has only increased by \$48,000. When you consider that as a percentage \$51 million, that is a pretty big reduction.

?We have really controlled Town expenses. On those areas we can't control, we have also tried to focus on controlling our staff costs by minimizing the needs and requests for new staff in this budget. Several of those requested positions were removed in the budget deliberations. We have also approved \$7.5 million for improving our existing infrastructure, \$19.5 for new infrastructure, including money for a new Operations Centre, and we have \$235,000 in there for some special studies.?

Looking at how Aurora compares across York Region, Mr. Elliott said that when one looks at the tax rate, Aurora is among the higher municipalities, bested only by Newmarket and ultimately Georgina, but looking at the average assessment of a similar home, Aurora is firmly in the middle of the pack.

?If we continue on this track of 3.42 per cent, we will continue to be in great company, right in the middle of the group,? said Mr. Elliott. ?There has been much bantering back and forth in the newspaper about our taxes relative to other municipalities, but these are the facts when we compare the residential houses to the same houses.?

Looking at another comparison of the total tax rate hike as a ?percentage of household income?, Aurora is among the lowest in the Region, he added.

?We know that it varies dramatically throughout the Region,? he said. ?Aurora is [at the low end] this time as a percentage of household income compared to communities like Georgina. I will let you draw your own conclusions on these various communities and I am sure they are all delightful to live in and to raise a family in, but it appears Aurora is particularly excellent on that.?

Along with Aurora's 2013 budget, rate increases for both water and waste water are also expected to be approved this week. The retail water rate will increase by \$1.60 per cubic metre of water with wastewater coming in at a \$1.40 increase per cubic metre. With

these hikes, the average residential water bill is expected to increase by just under \$35 per year, and by \$34 for wastewater, for a combined increase of 9.7 per cent.

Wholesale water rates, which are controlled by the Region and purchased by the Town for drinking water, will increase by 10 per cent.

Looking at the water rate, Mr. Elliott conceded that many see the water rates as a tax. He, however, is not one of them, explaining he sees it as a self-supporting business run by the Town.

We're tasked by at least half a dozen pieces of legislation to implement a municipal water system that is fully cost recoverable, said Mayor Geoffrey Dawe. There is quite an onerous task on us to ensure that we do that.

Added Councillor Chris Ballard: It is really difficult to keep a lid on things when the raw price is out of our hands and the Region is telling us about 10 per cent per year increases for five years, but two years ago when this Council was new, we put [the Department of Infrastructure] under the microscope on water costs and how much the Town is spending on leakages. I think [the] department has done a good job and I certainly have confidence that once the water enters our system, that we're taking not only good care of it but we're working hard to minimize loss.