

?Collaborative? approach will bring 2016 budget in by December

By Brock Weir

Councillors are poised to set an ambitious target this week to bring 2016's Operating Budget ? the portion of the municipal budget that directly impacts your taxes ? in for a landing by early December.

The move comes as Councillors gave the green light to a number of recommendations at the Committee level last week calling for a greater collaboration between elected officials and municipal staff on streamlining the budget process to target a 1.8 per cent residential tax increase, down from the 4.1 per cent tax increase for 2016 forecasted earlier this year.

Helping to achieve this goal are a number of objectives set out, in part, by Aurora's newly established Finance Advisory Committee, to reach a more palatable tax increase, continue efforts to reduce Aurora's reliance on interest accrued from Hydro Funds, reducing the reliance on supplementary taxes, and to put 11 proposed new hires at the Town Hall level on ice for the year ahead.

?I think we have had some great dialogue up to this point both about the budget process and the guiding principles around it, and I think what you're seeing here is a reflection of some of those discussions,? said Councillor Michael Thompson. ?I am optimistic the approach this time will be much more collaborative between all parties and, at the end of the day, we will have greater results for the residents.?

Approaching the budget process early on with a ?reasonable target? for a tax increase and tasking municipal staff to hit that target is something Councillor Paul Pirri said he has advocated for in the past. Moving in the direction of Newmarket, he added, will make the budget process more efficient moving forward.

?I don't necessarily think it is always in the best interests of our residents if we're sitting around a Council table late in the process, feeling pressure that we need to cut some things because it is not at a level we feel is acceptable, so we hack and slash without being as precise in that cut as I think we should be,? said Councillor Pirri. ?I would rather see our residents getting a more methodical budget that already meets their expectations in terms of what we're looking for an increase to be.

?If we're all agreed around the table that this is an adequate sum of money, then I think that works and that is a good direction to be going in. I look forward to staff coming forward to execute this in a way we should have been doing in the past and I have full faith in their ability to get this done.?

Helping steer this process forward will be Patrick Moyle, Aurora's interim CAO. In the month-or-so since he has been on the job, he told Councillors he has had the opportunity to look into areas where municipal business could be improved. The budget, he said, was one obvious stand-out for improvement.

?Council, for all intents and purpose, serves as a Board of Directors for an \$85 million per year business,? said Mr. Moyle. ?You raise that much and you spend that much on an annual basis. An approved budget in early December of this year is what we're implementing. In order to do that, we need to engage Council now. [This] breaks down the perceived barrier between senior staff and Council. I have seen some municipalities all too often where the budget process and discussion is reduced to an acrimonious debate between staff and elected officials. It is pretty much an ?us and them' mentality and the budget process essentially becomes a negotiation.

?Staff bring in a big number and Council believes it is their job to reduce that number to an affordable level and again in your business world you wouldn't do a budget that way. It would be much more straightforward. A budget should not be a confrontation. Staff and the people sitting at this table are on the same team, but the first step is to open a conversation and seek direction which is what this report attempts to do today.?